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RESEDA

By
MRS RANDOLPH





Julia Hazlehurst?
Halton Grange.



3 vols

9/12

M^r Charles Hay
Puecon

RESEDA.

VOL. I.

NOTE.

This book was to have been called "Mignonette," but as it was found that that title had already been used, "Reseda," the botanical equivalent, has been substituted.

E. Thomas

RESEDA

BY

MRS. RANDOLPH

AUTHOR OF

"GENTIANELLA," "WILD HYACINTH,"

"LITTLE PANSY,"

&c., &c.

No gorgeous flowers the meek reseda grace,
Yet sip with eager trunk yon busy race
Her simple cup, nor heed the dazzling gem
That beams in Fritillaria's diadem.

DR. EVANS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO
MY HUSBAND
THESE PAGES
ARE AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.





RESEDA.

CHAPTER I.

The darkness is pressing coldly around,
The windows shake with a lonely sound,
The stars are hid, and the night is drear,
The heart of silence throbs in thine ear ;
In thy chamber thou sittest alone,
Alone, alone, ah woe, alone !

Serenade—LOWELL.

“**M**IGNONETTE ! Mignonette ! wherever
are you ?”

The speaker was a handsome boy, or, as he would certainly have considered himself, a man, of about twenty. He was tall, and at present extremely slight, but there were not wanting

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connected with himself, and the village and neighbourhood, with his aunt Miss Millicent, always known as "Aunt Milly,"—who had taken charge of her brother and orphan nephews and niece for the last fifteen years, and whom her eldest nephew loved as if she had been the mother he had scarcely known—and satisfied himself that all matters in and about the rectory were much the same as when he had left home, he had sauntered up through the shady lime avenue to the Manor House, to see his pet little friend Mignonette.

From the time when she was a wee toddling babe of three, and he a tall stripling of twelve, these two had been fast friends. He had often given up a game of cricket, or some other boyish delight, to play with the little motherless girl, who seemed so lonely, and who told him, in childishly lisping accents, that she was so dull when he was at school. It would have seemed as if his sister Clare would have been a more suitable companion for her, but Clare was five years older than Mignonette, and looked down with the contempt of superior age



and wisdom on all games and amusements suited to "such a baby;" so, excepting during Edgar's holidays, the little girl at the manor had little companionship, and rarely saw any-one save her nurse and governess.

Miss Millicent had offered to Sir Clement to exercise supervision, as he was away very frequently for months at a time; but this had been in very early days, and during the reign of a most autocratic nurse, who gave it so plainly to be understood that she would brook no interference, that Sir Clement, fearful of some misunderstanding that might be referred to him and give him trouble, had firmly, though courteously, declined her offer, and nurse and governess had been provided as required by his sister, Mrs. Davenant, who resided in London.

Since the death of his beautiful young wife, three weeks after his little daughter's birth, Wychwood had seemed intolerable to Sir Clement. His attachment to Mignon Vane had been a long one, but during his elder brother's life his fortune had been so small that her

parents would not hear of their beautiful daughter thus "throwing herself away," and when, on Sir Henry's unexpected death, he became possessed of £20,000 a year, and obtained the fruition of his hopes, it was only to see his brief dream of happiness vanish at the end of fifteen short months. He left home almost immediately, and for long seemed unable to bear the sight of the child whose life had cost him that of her mother.

He came home occasionally for a week or so at long intervals, but he always seemed wretched and unsettled, and disappeared again as soon as the accumulated mass of business with the agent had been got through. It was now more than a year since he had made his appearance at Wychwood, and Mr. McDonald, the agent, who would have infinitely preferred a resident proprietor, as he cordially detested responsibility, told Dr. Barford, with a sigh, that Sir Clement wrote of a tour in India as having been decided upon.

"I have written to beg he will at any rate come home before he starts," sighed Mr. McDonald.



"It does seem a pity that a man like Sir Clement, with this splendid property, and who might and ought to be member for the county, should go wandering about the world as a mere nobody might do. He never seems to think of the responsibilities of his position ; and then there's poor little Miss Wychwood !"

"Poor little Mignonette !" said the rector. "Perhaps, until this wandering fit has quite worn off, it is better for her that he should be at home so little. She has never had the opportunity of knowing him well enough for it to be possible for her to miss him."

"She does, though ; it seems very strange, but so the servants say. She wanders about for days after he has been here, and asks over and over again when he will come back. He had her with him a good deal the last time he was here, and she cried for days after he went away."

"Poor little child !" said the rector, pityingly. "It is a strange, lonely life."

"Yes, indeed ; but yet in general she seems as blithe as a bird. It would be a grand thing

for her if Sir Clement were to marry again."

"I am not quite so sure of that," said Dr. Barford, thoughtfully. "A stepmother is sometimes but a doubtful blessing."

"Still it would keep Sir Clement at home, and there would be some one responsible, at any rate. Now Miss Wychwood is turned over from one governess to another; for the place is so dull that not one of them will stay. It must take Mrs. Davenant half her time to find them, they come and go so fast. This present French one has only been here four months, and I hear already she says she cannot bear it any longer."

As the rector walked home after this conversation, he thought even more pityingly than usual of the poor little girl at the manor. Very gladly would he and his sister have done anything in their power for her, but they were both extremely sensitive, more especially the rector, and, after Sir Clement's very decided refusal of Miss Millicent's kind offers, both felt it utterly impossible to intrude again on any of the arrangements at the manor. Besides, the rector's sensitiveness caused him to look years

ahead into the future, and to remember that, unless Sir Clement married again and had a son, Mignonette Wychwood would be a very great heiress, and that therefore any movement on his part might be misconstrued into a wish to establish a juvenile intimacy, and thus to secure so great a prize for one of his sons. If he had only had daughters he felt that he should, far oftener than was at present the case, have turned his steps towards the deserted Manor House. As it was, he was inclined to rejoice that the difference of age had prevented Clare from making a companion of Mignonette, and he had never realized how much Edgar saw of the lonely child when he was at home for his holidays.

Miss Millicent was quite aware of it, but she did not enter into her brother's feelings. The child, she thought, was far too young for there to be any danger of love-fancies entering her head for many a year to come. There were nine years between her and Edgar; he was a young man, while she was still a little child; and even if ultimately such a thing as their

falling in love with each other did come to pass—though it was very unlikely, as those best acquainted with each other were seldom those who did so—what harm would there be? The Barfords were of an old family, quite as old and as good as the Wychwoods; there would be no disparity of birth, whatever there might be of fortune; and though it was true that Mignonette would be a great heiress, still she did not see that it much mattered on which side the money was, so long as it was there. But she knew that her brother did not share her sentiments, and therefore said nothing about the many meetings which her nephew and Mignonette had in the Manor House woods.

One of the directions which Mrs. Davenant was very particular in giving to the many governesses whom she successively despatched to Wychwood, was that her niece was to be a great deal in the open air. As a young child the girl had been delicate, and the doctors had insisted so much on abundance of fresh air, that Mrs. Davenant always began with it as her

house, inhabited only by a little child and a few servants, was too dismal for their endurance, and with the exception of one lady, who held her ground for a whole year, none had remained longer than six months. There was hardly any excitement now, either to Mignonette or to the servants, in the arrival of a new governess: it was an event that had occurred so often that it seemed quite a matter of course. Perhaps the child's comfort depended more on her nurse, and, happily for her, that functionary, who was able to regale herself with a certain amount of society in the village, was by no means so apt to give up an easy and comfortable place as were Mesdemoiselles les Institutrices.

Certainly the Manor House itself was not a cheerful place. It was an old grey house, of no very particular style of architecture, built of dark grey stone, with a profusion of gables; and, having been added to at various times, abounded in long and tortuous passages, freely interspersed with steps leading from the height of one addition to the level of another. The

greater portion of the house was heavily covered with ivy, unrelieved by roses or any other creepers, and, as Sir Clement disliked its being cut more than could be avoided, it hung in dark masses over the windows, some of which were deeply-mullioned oriels, and others diamond-latticed casements. The only sounds that ever penetrated to the house were the sweeping of the gardeners' scythes as they mowed the grass in the pleasure-grounds, and the very distant horn of the carrier who plied twice a week between the village and the station, seven miles distant, at Chinton; and who adopted that method of intimating to those who lived near the roadside that he was coming, and that their commissions must be ready for him. At night there was another sound, and it was responsible for the abrupt departure of several of the governesses: the hooting of the owls, who had established a comfortable colony in the undisturbed ivy. The hooting of these birds terribly affected the Frenchwomen's nerves, and one who, drawing aside her curtains to admire the moonlight, found herself

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confronted by a large blinking white owl, gave a shriek which effectually scared the intruder, and was never fully persuaded that she had not seen something supernatural.

The larger rooms of the house were of course kept shut up, excepting when, on the occasion of one of Sir Clement's rare visits, the library and breakfast-room were prepared for his reception. The school-room, being the only room that was lived in, was the most cheerful room in the house, looking over the garden, and having large latticed casements capable of being widely opened; but both it and the small room adjoining, which served as a dining-room, were panelled and ceiled with dark oak, exquisitely carved, it is true, with garlands of fruit and flowers, but still somewhat gloomy and depressing in the dark days of autumn and winter. But worse than the darkness of the rooms, and even more terrific than the hooting of the owls to several of Mignonette's instructresses, were the long winding passages which lay between the school-room and the bed-rooms. Gas did not exist at Wychwood; lamps were by no means



lavishly employed in Sir Clement's absence; and strong-minded people would have doubtless laughed at the agonies of unreasoning terror frequently endured in those dark galleries. To make the matter more terrible, the picture-gallery, through which the nearest way to the bed-rooms lay, was said to be haunted; and, doubtless, when the moon shone through its tall windows—the upper portions of which were filled with stained glass which threw strange reflections on the polished floors, and the heavy overhanging masses of ivy swaying in the breeze cast weird shadows on the walls—it was, even apart from its ghostly reputation, a somewhat eerie place. Mignonette, who was to the manner born, ran through it at all times careless and unheeding, but her elders were far from sharing her indifference, and, in general, took a long round through dark and tortuous passages to avoid the dreaded spot.

Even by day the grounds were not very cheerful. There were deep and dark woods through which wound miles and miles of walks, carefully kept, and affording frequent glimpses of



charming sylvan scenery, delightful to those capable of appreciating them; but there were no extensive views or very striking landscapes, and mesdemoiselles, who would have preferred nothing more rural than the Champs Elysées, or at most the Bois de Boulogne, shuddered at the *tristesse* of the dark woods, and preferred pacing up and down the lime avenue which led to the great gates. This avenue was famous even in Limeshire, where this beautiful tree was so often to be seen. It was a double avenue, nearly two miles in length, the broad road having thirty feet of turf on each side of it, and the double row of splendid trees on either hand had each a path spread, as was the drive, with dazzlingly white gravel brought from a considerable distance. The scent of this magnificent avenue, when the limes were in full flower, was a thing, when once enjoyed, not to be easily forgotten; while through the drooping branches might be obtained frequent glimpses of other, though less splendid avenues, and the deer could be seen couched among the brake or bounding across the sward. The timber was



the only great beauty of Wychwood Manor, for the country was very flat and afforded few, if any, distant views. But, besides the famous limes, the park abounded in ancestral oaks, fine Spanish chestnuts, spreading walnuts, and, above all, in beautiful old gnarled thorns, both pink and white, which, when covered with sheets of blossom in the spring, were a sight worth driving far to see. To the right of the avenue, and not very far from the house, was a small lake formed by the damming up of a pretty little river which meandered through the grounds, and it was crossed by a picturesque old stone bridge, somewhat too imposing for the size of the stream, a short distance before reaching the house. The lake had a small island, on which was a group of three Scotch firs, whose red trunks and dark foliage told well against the prevailing tints of green, and on the side furthest from the house was a perfect thicket of bulrushes and flags.

Everything was, by Sir Clement's desire, kept in as good order as if he were at home: the grass was mown, the walks weeded and rolled,

the yew-hedges in the formal gardens clipped, and the flowers planted exactly as if a houseful of guests might at any moment be expected to admire them; but he declined to allow the manor to be a show-place, though he had very often been solicited to do so. It was permitted to the families in the neighbourhood to drive through the park, turning off from the main avenue about a quarter of a mile from the bridge; but no one was allowed to go over either the house or the gardens, the latter restriction greatly mortifying the gardener, who felt that it was very hard that all his talents, and triumphs of horticultural dexterity should waste their sweetness on the desert air, and yet dared not relax his efforts, lest, on one of Sir Clement's rare but unexpected visits, he should be found wanting and lose a very comfortable place. He consoled himself by unlimited grumbling, and by carrying off the prizes at all the horticultural shows in the county.

The gardens, grounds, and farm were the only things that were thus kept up and cared

for ; the stables were empty, with the exception of one sturdy, rough, old pony which was supposed to draw an antiquated pony-chaise, but whose chief duty really was to carry Mignonette, bare-backed, for an occasional scamper across the park, where she would startle the deer out of the brake, and send them careering away in all directions. Few questions were asked as to what she did during the hours which, according to Mrs. Davenant's directions, she spent out of doors. It seemed to have been tacitly agreed that she might be allowed to wander alone, and nothing had ever occurred to challenge the wisdom of such a decision. Sometimes the governess would scold because she did not come in quite punctually, or she would get into disgrace with her nurse for some more than common damage done to her raiment ; but no curtailment of her liberty was ever attempted, though on such occasions it was often threatened. And now, having given some slight account of Mignonette Wychwood's surroundings, it is time we made acquaintance with her-



self, and joined Edgar Barford, whom we left under the oak-tree calling for his little play-fellow.



CHAPTER II.

Rippling through thy branches goes the sunshine,
 Among the leaves that palpitate for ever ;
 Ovid in thee a pining nymph had prisoned,
 The soul once of some tremulous inland river,
 Quivering to tell her woe, but, ah ! dumb, dumb for ever !
 Upon the brink of some wood-nestled lakelet,
 Thy foliage, like the tresses of a dryad,
 Dripping about thy slim white stem, whose shadow
 Slopes quivering down the water's dusky quiet,
 Thou shrink'st as on her bath's edge would some startled
 dryad.

The Birch-Tree—LOWELL.

“**M**IGNONETTE ! Where are you ?” But
 echo alone replied. At length, losing
 patience, Edgar determined to explore, and,
 leaving the oak-tree, he struck across the
 shrubberies, threaded a wilderness of rhodo-

her clustering brown curls that revealed the bright golden tinge in them ; her face was perhaps a little thinner, and certainly she looked somewhat pale. These were Edgar's observations before, standing at the foot of the tree, he called to her very gently, for fear of startling her.

"Mignonette!"

The girl raised her eyes dreamily, but, when she saw who it was, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled.

"Edgar! Delightful! Wait one moment!" And springing from her seat in a way that would have filled anyone not acquainted with her early habits with terror, she ran lightly down the sloping trunk. "How glad I am to see you again! I thought you were never coming!" she cried, joyously shaking him by both hands, and holding up her face for the fraternal kiss which Edgar always gave her on their first meeting after absence.

Somehow that day the usual endearment jarred him, and though he could not refuse the caress so innocently asked for, he gave the kiss

with an embarrassment which he had never felt before.

"I have been hunting for you everywhere," he said. "You are further afield than usual, Mignonette, or you would have heard me calling."

"That tree has been my arm-chair all the summer," said Mignonette. "I felt sure that there mademoiselle would never think of looking for me."

"Mademoiselle Damain?"

"Damain! oh! dear no. There has been Mademoiselle Duvernoir since her, and now it is Mademoiselle Lassalle, and she's going, thank goodness!"

"They seem to follow each other as quickly as ever. And why shall you be so glad to lose Mademoiselle Lassalle?"

"Oh! because she worries so about my being out so much, and about my complexion. I'm to be freckled, and brown, and burnt, and hideous, and my hand will be like a ploughboy's instead of a lady's, and all that nonsense. Aunt Matilda always makes a point, luckily, of my



being out as much as I like except at lesson time, but she tried to make me walk quietly up and down in the shade, with a big hat, and a yellow veil, and a parasol, and gauntlet gloves! But I wrote to Aunt Matilda, and she wrote that I was to go out just as I liked as usual, and that I was too young for my complexion to signify very much just yet. But mademoiselle rubs my face over with cold cream every night when I go to bed, and makes me put on gloves. She doesn't know I take them off, and get up and wash my face as soon as she is gone."

"You're as rebellious as ever, I see, Mignonette."

"I don't see that she's any right. None of the others ever did it, and it isn't Aunt Matilda, for she said it didn't signify yet."

The constant change of instructresses had made Mignonette somewhat independent of authority. She passed so rapidly from one system and set of rules to another that there was no established law fixed, as in most school-rooms, as that of the Medes and Persians, which she felt bound to obey.



"Then," she went on, "as she couldn't have her own way about muffling me up, she was determined to keep me in as much as possible, so she lengthened the lesson hours, and when I wrote to Aunt Matilda, of course she didn't understand all about how and why it was done—it's so difficult to make a quantity of little things clear in a letter, I think—and she wrote that, as I grew older, I must expect school hours to grow longer, and a lot of the same sort. Of course I knew all that quite well; it was *why* it was done, not the longer hours, I minded."

"You seem amusing yourself pretty well out here, though."

"Yes, she's laid up to-day with *migraine*, so I've been out in the woods all day. Oh! Edgar, it was so lovely this morning, I couldn't read. There were two kingfishers just like live sapphires flashing about among the water-lilies."

"Let me see what you are reading. Shelley!" as he took the book from her hand. "My dear child, who gave you that?"



don, I mean vacation; I cried—and Clare and Edwin laughed at me.”

“You dear little thing! So you missed me?”

It is very sweet to find one has been missed, even when it is only by a little girl of eleven years old.

“Missed you! Why, Edgar, you *know* I did. I seemed to have so much to say to you, and now you are here I don’t know where to begin.”

“Well, I shall be at home a whole fortnight now, so we shall have time to talk.”

“Only a fortnight!” said Mignonette, wistfully; “why, it will be gone almost before we have begun.”

“Did you see much of Edwin?”

“No; you know we were never friends,—not, at least, as you and I are, Edgar. He came to fish sometimes, and he teased me, and laughed because I wouldn’t help him with some horrid worms he wanted, and then he kicked Tippet.”

“Poor Mr. Tippet! that was too bad. By-



the-by, where is he? I was quite surprised not to be saluted with a salvo of barks."

"He cannot bear my fancy for that tree," said Mignonette, laughing. "He tried once or twice to walk along it, and get to me, but he fell into the water; then he used to sit on the bank and howl, but now he finds it is no use, and he just goes off and amuses himself with the rabbits, coming back every now and then to see that I am all right. I will soon bring him," and raising a silver whistle to her lips, she blew it once or twice.

The signal was soon answered. A beautiful, sandy-coloured Skye terrier came bounding out of the wood, and rushed towards his mistress, when, suddenly catching sight of Edgar, he flew towards him in a paroxysm of barking.

"Why, Tippet, old boy, don't you remember me?" said Edgar, and at the sound of his voice the Skye, who had belonged to him, and been given by him to Mignonette to console her for the loss of a pet fox-terrier, threw himself upon him in the wildest delight. "There, old



fellow, that will do. What will your mistress say, if you are overjoyed to see anyone but her?"

"He is like his mistress: only too happy to see old friends," said Mignonette.

"He has grown very handsome; you know he was little more than a puppy when I saw him last. It was a good idea of yours, calling him Tippet."

"Doesn't it suit him exactly?" said Mignonette, drawing the Skye caressingly towards her, and stroking the sort of ruff of silvery hair that hung back over his shoulders, and certainly made the name of Tippet singularly appropriate. "Dear little fellow, he is devoted to me. Fancy, mademoiselle wanted to say he never was to come into the house!"

"No! Why?"

"She is terribly afraid of all dogs. I believe she thinks they are all chronically mad; and then Mr. Tippet hates her—he does not like many people—and growls at her, and sometimes runs at her feet. It is only play; he has not an idea of biting; but it frightens her out

of her wits, and I verily believe he knows it, and enjoys the fun of teasing her."

"Naughty Mr. Tippet! Don't encourage him too much in mischief, or some governess more determined than Mademoiselle Lassalle will really banish him."

"No, that she shouldn't! I would write to papa himself!"

"And if Sir Clement were in India?"

"Ah!" said Mignonette, and her countenance fell; "do not make me think of that before it comes—it will be bad enough then."

"Well, Mignonette, while I am at home we must make the most of it."

"Yes, if I can; but," very doubtfully, "mademoiselle does everything to prevent my enjoying myself. She splits lessons up so that I can only get out for a quarter of an hour at a time, and then have to go back for something else. It is only just aggravation. She never thought of it till Aunt Matilda said I was to go out as I liked; but she says it's to 'give the brain slight repose between each study,' and enable it to begin again afresh. Such non-



sense! As if it didn't only make one worry and fret."

"You poor little thing! It must be a bore. But you say she's going."

"Yes; but, you see, Aunt Matilda is at Littlehampton, and nothing but an earthquake would take her to London one day sooner than usual, the 15th of October, and, till she goes up and finds another, mademoiselle will stay."

"Well, it is the 25th of September now; it isn't more than three weeks."

"But it'll take all the time you're here, and, unless she has another *migraine*, I shall never get a clear afternoon."

"Suppose I beard the lion and ask for a holiday?"

"I'm afraid it would make matters worse. I talked about you a little at first, and she saw me talking to Edwin one day, and you can't think the fuss! *Les petites filles*—she *will* call me a *petite fille*, though I'm as tall as she is, and I'm sure I feel thirty!" and Mignonette drew herself up with all the dignity of which her eleven years and a half were capable, making



her companion smile, sorry as he felt for the lonely child—" *Les petites filles* were not to talk to *les messieurs*; it was not *convenable*, *cela ne se faisait pas en France*, and when I remarked that happily this was England, and that I had known you all my life, and meant to go on seeing and talking to you whenever I could, as I had always done, she got into a passion and said I was impertinent, and locked me up in my room with three pages of the 'Henriade' to learn. I didn't tell her I had learnt it before, and, oh! Edgar, I gave her such a fright!"

"How?"

"Well, you know, they're all frightened to death, all the governesses, of the ghost in the picture-gallery, and I climbed out of my window and got into the next one, and went down there in my white frock to wait for mademoiselle. She liked to pretend she wasn't afraid to walk through it, and just as she got half way, I stepped out in the moonlight in my white frock. Oh, she gave such a yell! She dropped her candle and ran back to the school-room, and was afraid to move again, and



stopped there all night. The next day she wrote and told Aunt Matilda she could stay no longer in a haunted house."

"Mignonette! Mignonette! it was very naughty of you; you know it was."

"Don't say so, Edgar, *please*, because I mind what *you* say. Call it mischievous, if you like, but don't say it was really wrong."

A pair of large liquid-grey eyes were raised pleadingly to his face. Though their owner was but a child, Edgar was conscious of an unwonted thrill; it seemed impossible seriously to blame a child who, though carefully watched and elaborately taught, had been really so completely left to herself, no one governess having remained long enough to obtain an influence over her mind and heart. So he answered,

"Well, let us say thoughtless. I am sure you would have been very sorry if anything had happened to mademoiselle,—if she had fallen and hurt herself in her hurry, or had a fit from fright, or—or anything——"

"I suppose I should," said Mignonette, rather doubtfully. "Yes; I am sure I didn't want to



hurt her. I never thought of that. What I did think of afterwards was that it wasn't honest to let her give me a punishment lesson which I knew and said off the next morning without once looking at, so I learnt three pages of Schiller's 'Wilhelm Tell' instead, which was much harder, and then I felt satisfied."

Edgar laughed.

"And did you tell mademoiselle?"

"No! oh, no!" with a surprised look. "Ah! you do not know her; she would have talked, talked till I was stupid. But, you see, it would never do for you to ask for a holiday."

"No, so it seems, and yet it is a pity we can't have a day's nutting."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mignonette, with a look of such intense longing that Edgar felt it was really cruel to have suggested such a pleasure, if it were really impossible of attainment:

"I'll see what I can do," he said, hastily. "Perhaps Aunt Milly can suggest some way in which it could be managed. Mademoiselle would not think her such an ogre, I suppose, as she would me?"



"Oh, no. We went to tea at the rectory once, and she was quite full of *ce bon Monsieur le Curé* and *cette douce Mademoiselle Millie* for days after. And she thought it such a pity I did not take pattern by Clare, and sit still, and keep my dress pretty and tidy, instead of rushing about everywhere, and tearing my frock! I don't believe Clare ever did run, do you?"

"Well, when you are her age perhaps you will be equally sedate."

"But I shall never look tidy, like Clare," said Mignonette, with a half sigh.

As Edgar looked at her he could hardly help a smile at the thought of her ever resembling his tall, slender, quiet, Quakerishly-neat sister. Clare had always been a quiet child, disliking all games that necessitated exertion and disarranged her dress, dirtied her hands, or ruffled her hair, one strand of whose smooth gold she could not endure to see out of place. Mignonette presented a complete contrast. Her hair, of a rich nut-brown, with golden gleams through it, was very curly, and not even Clare would

have been able to reduce it to the sleek smoothness which was so dear to her. At the present moment it was not only curly, but excessively rough; several hairpins had fallen out, and the greater portion hung, in a most dishevelled manner, down her back.

Then Mademoiselle Lassalle had certainly been a true prophetess when she predicted freckles and sunburn as the certain result of her pupil's unchecked wanderings. That Mignonette's skin was naturally very white could be seen when the soft breeze lifted her hair, and showed the line where the forehead had been sheltered from the sun; but she was burnt as brown as a gipsy, and her nose, chin, and forehead were covered with unsightly freckles, as were her rough, though tiny and well-formed hands. Pretty, as she undoubtedly was, Edgar, who was extremely fastidious as to feminine appearance, saw clearly all the defects, and began to think it was really time that some one with authority should take Mignonette's dress and complexion in hand. He could not help saying,



"Well, without being quite so quiet as Clare perhaps, Mignonette, you might be a little tidier. Just look at your frock now!"

The girl glanced down at the pink cotton, stained in one place by a fall on damp earth, green in another from the moss on the tree-trunk, torn and ragged in almost every direction.

"It was clean this morning," she said, almost piteously. "How angry nurse will be! She says there never was anyone like me for tearing and spoiling clothes."

"I can believe it," said Edgar. "And, Mignonette, without smothering yourself in a yellow veil, or messing with mademoiselle's cosmetics, don't you think you could manage to wear gloves and a shady hat? You can't think how freckled and brown you are."

The great grey eyes looked up at him pathetically.

"I wonder if that was what papa meant when he laughed, and said I looked like a wild girl of the woods only just caught."

"I'm sure it was," cried Edgar, delighted to



have some expression of Sir Clement's to give weight to his words. "It's all very well for Mrs. Davenant to say it's too soon to signify, but she can't know how you're ruining your skin. It'll never come right, if you don't take care."

Mignonette stooped for her battered straw hat, in which, as the most comfortable place available, Mr. Tippet had serenely established himself, and put it meditatively on her head, thereby crowning the edifice, and making herself look a veritable scarecrow.

"I can't wear it in my tree," she said, plaintively; "it catches, and tumbles off. More than once I have had to fish it out of the river."

"Then you had better find another seat," said Edgar. "You don't like to be called a child, you know; but what young lady would you find sitting on a bough hanging over the river, where not even a dog can get at her, without a hat, without gloves, and not caring a bit how she looks or what anyone thinks?"



"Yes. Yes, indeed, Edgar I do. I care very much what you and papa think, and if you say I ought to wear gloves and a shady hat, and bother about my complexion, I will try to, indeed I will, whenever I don't forget. But, if we do go nutting, I may be comfortable just that one day, mayn't I? You won't mind just for once?"

"No, no, I'll absolve you from toilet observances that one day, if I can get leave for you," said Edgar, laughing; "but it's nonsense to think you won't be quite as comfortable. It's all habit, and when once you're used to dressing and behaving like a young lady, you'll wonder how you ever could have endured this way of going on. Oh! you may shake your head, but you will, indeed, and I'm sure Sir Clement will like to see the change."

"I would do anything to please him," said Mignonette, in a low voice; "and, oh! if he wouldn't go to India, and would but come and live at home only a little! But I suppose he never will."

"Oh! yes, he is sure to some day."



"I don't think he can bear it because of mamma," said Mignonette. "I went into the drawing-room one day when he was here last, and he was sitting before her picture with his head on his arms folded on the table, sobbing as if his heart would break. Of course I ran away, so that he should not know I saw. Sometimes I wish I were like mamma, but then I don't think papa would ever be able to bear the sight of me."

Edgar, who had heard that it was a considerable time before Sir Clement had been able to look at his little girl, made no answer to this.

"He will be sure to come and settle down some day," he said. "Perhaps this long journey to India will be his last. You see you will be older and more companionable then, Mignonette, and, until you are, it would be rather dull for him here all alone."

"Yes, I have often thought of that," said Mignonette, who had lived so much alone with her own thoughts that she was far older than her age. "When he is here I take care always



to read the newspaper. Of course I don't mean I understand it all, but at any rate I learn to know the names of the things and the people he talks about. Sometimes he begins talking to me, and then he forgets it isn't somebody grown up, and if I can just put in a word that sounds like understanding, sometimes he goes on, not remembering it is only me, and it must be so much more amusing for him than only talking of what he thinks I could understand."

"Very dull for you, though."

"Oh! no, I like it. I like books and talk that are grown up. Do you know, Clare asked me if I hadn't got a doll?"

"Was that very dreadful? Poor Mignonette!"

"She always seems to think I am such a child. There is only five years between us, after all, and, when she comes back from school for good next midsummer, she will be grown up, and a young lady 'come out.' So I can't be such a mere baby, can I?"

"You don't look very ancient," said Edgar, laughing, as the tiny child, in her moss-stained and battered attire, stood before him, trying to



draw herself up imposingly. "I can't say you've grown much in this year."

"No," said Mignonette, rather dolefully. "I hope I shall some day. I should like to be tall like mamma was ; but papa says all the Wychwood women are small, and that I must make up my mind to it, and remember the proverb, 'Little and good!'"

"Well, I must be going now," said Edgar. "Oughtn't you to be going home, Mignonette. It is getting late. Mr. Tippet has been uneasy for some time."

"I am always so sorry to leave the wood. I get here so seldom now," said Mignonette, regretfully, as they walked together through the wood, emerged into the wilderness of rhododendrons, and sauntered slowly through it to the shrubbery. Under the oak where Edgar had stood to call her they paused, and Mignonette again recurred to the nutting.

"I'm sure mademoiselle will say 'No' if she can, but you'll manage it, Edgar." And, when he promised to do his best, she kissed him once more, and ran away into the formal garden

that separated the shrubberies from the house, while her companion made his way slowly back to the rectory.



CHAPTER III.

Cruelty to dumb animals is one of the distinguishing vices of the lowest and basest of the people. Wherever it is found, it is a certain mark of ignorance and meanness—an intrinsic mark, which all the external advantages of wealth, splendour, and nobility cannot obliterate. It will consist neither with true learning nor true civility, and religion disclaims and detests it as an insult upon the majesty and goodness of God, who, having made the instincts of brute beasts minister to the improvement of the mind, as well as to the convenience of the body, hath furnished us with a motive to mercy and compassion toward them very strong and powerful, but too refined to have any influence on the illiterate or irreligious.

JONES OF NAYLAND.

“**B**UT, my dear Edgar,” remonstrated Miss Barford, when he announced to her that he had promised Mignonette that she would, in some way or another, contrive that the nutting



expedition should take place—"my dear boy, how is it possible? Mademoiselle Lassalle would think it very odd if I were to write and ask her to allow you to join her pupil, and go off nutting together, as she seems to object to your meeting; and you surely don't propose that I should invite Mignonette to go nutting with me?"

"No, no, dear Aunt Milly," said Edgar, putting his arm round her still trim waist, and laying his cheek to hers, as had always been his wont when endeavouring to persuade her to do anything that he specially wished; "but couldn't you invite mademoiselle to spend the day, and say that it would be such a good opportunity for the annual nutting expedition which your nephews and Mignonette have always enjoyed? I'm sure, if you could have seen how the poor little girl's face lighted up at the thought of it, you would manage it somehow! Poor child! she has not many pleasures."

"No, indeed, poor little thing," and Miss Barford's gentle face became wistfully pitiful.



"Well, Edgar, I will do what I can, but I confess it is a severe undertaking to me—a whole day's French! And you must settle it for some day when your father will be out; he must not be worried with Mademoiselle Lassalle."

"No, of course not. Did he not say last night he must go to Alchester on Tuesday for two nights? If that is certain, Wednesday would do capitally."

And so it was at length settled, Miss Barford writing a most diplomatic note, speaking of the annual nutting excursion as a matter of course, and hoping that Mademoiselle Lassalle, who would find it dull to be alone all day, would spend the time at the rectory. Had mademoiselle been going to remain at the Manor House, she would very probably have refused to sanction an expedition which considerably shocked her ideas of propriety; but she would be leaving Wychwood in a very short time, a protest more or less on her part would hardly affect the unorthodox method of Mignonette's education, and therefore she shrugged her shoulders,



and thought she might as well secure for herself one day's escape from "*cette triste maison*" to the bright, pretty rectory, where Miss Barford, if not a very eloquent Frenchwoman, was at any rate a most admirable listener, which, to mademoiselle's taste, was almost preferable. So she accepted the invitation, giving her pupil a long exordium on the violence she was doing her feelings in allowing so strange a treat, and warning her that it would be certainly for the last time, as by the ensuing autumn she would be of "*un âge trop mûr*" to be allowed to roam about in the company of "*ces messieurs*."

Next autumn was a long way off. Mignonette did not trouble herself as to what might happen then; she was far too happy at having obtained an unexpected permission now, and spent the days that intervened before the fateful Wednesday in speculations on the probable state of the weather, which militated seriously against her studies.

At length the great day dawned, and Mignonette was out of bed at daybreak to see a dull, grey morning, which to her experienced



country eyes foretold a fine, if not a very brilliant day. She could eat no breakfast from excitement, and, as soon as the meal was concluded, flew off to the housekeeper's room to see what Mrs. Jenkins was providing for the little basket which was to contain her dinner. The picnic meal was one of the great delights of the expedition, and to-day they had determined to have even a greater treat than usual, namely, tea in the woods, which would necessitate the great happiness of lighting a fire. She had only seen Edgar for a few moments after afternoon service on Sunday, and he had then imparted this idea, which had almost made her jump for joy. At eleven o'clock she set forth with her basket on her arm, dressed, as nurse said in vexation, in "a bundle of rags," and accompanied by Tippet,—who was perfectly aware that something unusual was going on, and was consequently in a great state of excitement,—to meet Edgar under the oak.

But there was not only Edgar, and, as she saw the second figure, Mignonette felt a pang of disappointment; the holiday would still be

pleasant, of course, but it would not be the dream of delight which she had hoped. Edwin was there too; he had returned two days earlier than was expected from a visit in a neighbouring county, and though Edgar would of course prevent her being much teased, still the day would not be by any means so charming as if she had been alone with him.

Edgar and Edwin Barford were twins, Edgar being the elder, and the likeness between them was so extraordinary that their nearest relations could hardly distinguish them, excepting by the colour of their eyes,—Edgar's were a deep blue, and Edwin's were brown, but, as both had peculiarly long black lashes, the difference could only be discovered by close investigation. Their voices and gestures too were precisely similar, but there the resemblance ended. They were as different in mind and disposition as they were alike in person. Edgar had good abilities without being precisely clever, was industrious and painstaking, honest, straightforward, and manly, his



chief failings being an extremely sensitive pride, and a somewhat morbid tendency to self-introspection. Edwin was brilliantly clever, and could do almost anything he chose, but he was incorrigibly idle, and allowed himself constantly to be surpassed by boys of far inferior abilities; he could, when he considered it worth his while, be extremely fascinating, but as a general rule he cared only to please himself, and let neither the comfort of others nor a strict respect for right and wrong interfere with his amusements, so long as he felt tolerably sure of escaping blame. He was vain and self-indulgent, and was far from possessing the scrupulous regard for truth which characterised his brother,

If their friends found difficulty in distinguishing the brothers, such was by no means the case with animals, who shrank from Edwin quite as much as they confided in Edgar. Tip-pet slunk behind his mistress when Edwin turned to speak to her, and no calls or persuasions would induce him to approach him.

"Obstinate cur!" said Edwin, who was



always particularly sensitive to the strong dislike of him manifested by dogs ; " we'll duck you in the river presently, my fine fellow, and see if it'll make you do what you're told."

" You shan't !" said Mignonette, hotly. " Edgar you won't let him tease, will you ?"

" No, no ; be quiet, Edwin," said Edgar, " it is a shame to tease the child ;" and though Mignonette did not particularly like being called a child, still she was thankful to have a friend at hand.

The scene of the day's amusement was a hazel copse about two miles from the house, lying on each side of a small dell that ran down to the river. The ground under the nut-bushes was carpeted with the softest moss, and the sun, which had at length made its appearance, was shining brightly, and chequering the mossy ground with flickering shadows. On the top of one bank were several clusters of the beautiful pink musk-mallow, and up the trunks of some of the large beech-trees in the centre of the dell, honeysuckle and clematis had been trained. At the bottom the river formed a



little bay, starred with water-lilies and surrounded with a thicket of bulrushes and yellow flags.

It was a lovely spot, but little attention was paid to its beauties by the trio, whose one object was nuts, to the exclusion of everything else. There they hung in large, tempting, brown clusters, for the most part safely out of reach of pilfering fingers, but easily attainable by means of the long hooked sticks with which they were each provided. Each was to make a separate pile, and then compare who had done the most. Tippet mounted guard over his mistress's pile, and presently a violent fit of barking made Edgar and Mignonette look round, to see Edwin endeavouring to remove some of the latter's spoils.

"Hands off, Edwin! That's not fair!" cried Edgar.

"Oh, it's too hot to bother. I thought you'd never be a bit the wiser, if I'd equalised the heaps; neither would you, but for this brute," with a kick at Tippet, which that sagacious animal skilfully evaded.



"Good Tippet!" said his mistress. "He doesn't like thieves."

"Well, if you two like to slave in the heat, I don't. I shall go and open the luncheon-baskets."

"Which means there will be nothing left for us," said Edgar, laughing. "Come, Mignonette, you will be none the worse for a rest. It is very hot, as Edwin says."

They had their picnic under a fine beech-tree by the river, the only drawback being that Edwin would pelt poor Mr. Tippet with beech-nuts, to that intelligent animal's infinite disgust, and once threw him a piece of sandwich, which he had privately filled with mustard, thereby causing the poor little animal infinite discomfort.

They sat quietly for some time after their luncheon, Mignonette leaning against the tree resting, and gently stroking Tippet's head, which lay on her lap; the two young men lying on the grass, watching the smoke of their cigars curl upwards. Not a sound disturbed the stillness but the lapping of the water among



the bulrushes, and the hum of the insects. Presently Edgar roused himself.

"Come along, Mignonette, we are very lazy. We shall have really nothing to show for our day's work."

And they went to work again with such a will that, when at last they were too tired to do any more, and declared it was time for tea, the question arose as to how they could possibly carry home their treasures. At length Edgar proposed that, as their spoils would far overflow all available baskets and handkerchiefs, he should run back to the manor while Mignonette was packing up the tea-things, and fetch some sufficiently large receptacle.

The delight of making the fire, and, it must be confessed, some difficulty respecting its successful achievement, took a long time, and the sun was beginning to get low as he ran off, saying he should be back directly. Mignonette was very busy, finding, in her inexperience, some difficulty in getting everything into the required space. Edwin had, to her considerable relief, disappeared, and she was so busily oc-

complicated knots resisted all her efforts. Lying on her face along the trunk of the tree, she then slowly raised the dog by pulling up the cord, which cut her fingers and made them bleed, and began to endeavour to unfasten the handkerchief.

The uncertain light added to her difficulties, as at first did Tippet's struggles; but he seemed to understand her orders, and remained quiet when she spoke to him. At length the knots began to give, in another moment he would be free; and then Mignonette paused. Poor little fellow, he did so hate the water! It would be cruel, just when he had suffered so much, to let him fall into the river, and yet it was very difficult to prevent it. Still she would try; and soothing him, and exhorting him to be quiet, she passed one hand under him, and with the other completed the unfastening of the loosened knots. Then she drew him up on to the branch preparatory to achieving her retreat to the shore; but Tippet's delight at feeling something solid under his feet, after so long vainly pawing the air, was too great to be



restrained, and he began to jump and spring in his mistress's arms in a way that seriously endangered her balance.

"Quiet, quiet, Tippet!" she exclaimed, slowly beginning her by no means easy retrograde movement along the trunk. It might very probably have been accomplished in safety, but a sound struck Tippet's ear, and he burst into a fit of barking. It startled Mignonette, she lost her balance, and, being unable to recover it, she and Tippet fell together into the water.

The sound which had caused the catastrophe was that of Edgar's return, accompanied by one of the gardeners with a large basket for the nuts.

"What on earth was that?" he cried, hearing the splash and Mignonette's cry; and Edwin, emerging from his retreat, replied,

"Mignonette fell from the tree," and plunged into the water. In a minute he returned with the child insensible in his arms.

"We must get her home as fast as possible," cried Edgar; "or, stay,—the rectory is much nearer, we had better take her there. Just run



on, Edwin, and tell Aunt Milly what has happened; and, Gibbs, you had better run for Dr. Raven. Don't tell anyone what has happened—it's no use making a fuss."

It struck Edgar as very strange, as, his directions having been obeyed, he carried Mignonette swiftly and tenderly towards the rectory, that Tippet should be so tightly clasped in one arm that he had found it impossible to remove him. The poor little dog was in a pitiable state, whining, licking his mistress's face, and occasionally giving a melancholy howl. What could it all mean? wondered Edgar. Edwin had said that Mignonette fell from the tree—but Tippet could not have been there too. Could he have jumped in when he saw her fall, and had she caught hold of him? Possible, certainly, but hardly likely. How stupid of Edwin not to have prevented such an accident! How annoyed his father would be! For that matter, he could hardly be more so than he was himself. It was he who had proposed and arranged the excursion; it was his fault that the child had been left alone to get into danger;



he should have sent Edwin for the basket, or left the nuts. What could it have signified if they had not been brought home till the next day? It was all his fault, his stupidity; he should never forgive himself if the poor little thing were really ill. Ah! there was a moan! At any rate that meant returning consciousness, which was some comfort.

Miss Barford met them at the door, but she was far too sensible and practical a woman to ask questions when there was anything to be done. Mignonette was at once carried upstairs, and Miss Barford, Dr. Raven, and the housekeeper, who had been the boys' nurse, left in possession. But Mademoiselle Lassalle, who had been just starting on her return home when Edwin came in with the intelligence of the disaster, was voluble, and asked so many questions that she never paused for answers. Ah! where had been her usual sagacity that she had acceded to the wishes of *cette bonne tante*, and allowed her precious pupil, *enfant unique et héritière*, to go off for the day *parcourir les champs avec deux jeunes écoliers*? Where had



been that wisdom for which she, Josephine Lassalle, was so famous? What would say to her *cette bonne mère de famille*, Madame Davenant? And at the thought mademoiselle threw up her hands and eyes.

Edwin had the benefit of most of her lamentations, for Edgar was sitting at the top of the stairs waiting for the first tidings of Mignonette's state. How long it seemed! Surely it could be nothing so very terrible; the child had not been in the water long enough to do her any very serious harm; he could not himself understand why she was insensible. At length the door opened, and Dr. Raven appeared.

"What news, doctor?" asked Edgar, eagerly.

"Well, better than I hoped for at first. There was an ugly blow on the head, which had produced unconsciousness, and I feared concussion of the brain, but I hope we shall escape that. She is conscious now; the broken arm is comparatively a slight matter."

"A broken arm! Poor little thing!"

"Can you explain how it happened? She



had her pet dog so tightly clasped in the uninjured arm that we had the greatest difficulty in removing him. Poor little fellow ! while she lay insensible he was most wretched."

"Indeed I can tell you nothing, except that my brother said she fell from the tree."

"The tree!—what on earth was she doing there, and how could she have had the dog?"

"I can't make it out. We must ask Edwin."

But Edwin's account was by no means clear ; he hoped that the blow which had stunned Mignonette would render her incapable of remembering clearly all that had occurred, and he had no intention of inculpating himself, if he could help it, as the author of the catastrophe, so he gave a very confused description, which the doctor at length cut short by observing that, after all, knowing how the accident had happened would be of little assistance in curing the patient. Edgar thought it very strange, and suspected that Edwin knew more than he chose to tell ; but even he was far from

imagining that his brother was really the author of the catastrophe.

Mademoiselle Lassalle quite overwhelmed the doctor, whose knowledge of French was extremely limited, with her exclamations, questions, and lamentations. She declared hysterically that it was quite impossible that she should go home; that to approach the manor, while the only child of the house lay at the rectory in imminent peril of death, was more than could be expected of female fortitude. In vain Edgar, translating for Dr. Raven, assured her that to all appearance there was not the slightest danger, and that probably, beyond the broken arm, which had been very satisfactorily set, Mignonette would the next day be little the worse for her adventure. Mademoiselle was really rather nervous and upset, and besides this, she could not resist the opportunity of exhibiting her sensibilities when three members of the male sex were present to admire and console her; so from lamentations and protestations she gradually worked herself up into an attack of hysterics, which, however, was



promptly checked by Dr. Raven, who laid her on the sofa and dashed a quantity of water in her face.

“*Atroce ! barbare ! Vous vous appelez médecin ! —vous m’insultez !*” cried mademoiselle, springing up in a fury ; then collapsing again on the sofa in a fit of hysterical sobbing, which was, however, promptly checked when she saw the doctor again advancing towards her armed with water.

“Come, mademoiselle,” he said, “there is no use in your remaining here. I will take one more look at my little patient, and then I will see you home. It is quite dark now, and I daresay you would rather not face the dark walk alone. Be ready in five minutes,” and he left the room.

Mademoiselle murmured, but she had the sense to see that there was really nothing else to be done. She was of no use at the rectory, and had much better go home. So she sulkily prepared for her walk, and when the doctor returned and reported that all was going on favourably, set out with him in the darkness,

secretly thankful to have an escort. When she was gone Edgar and Edwin began to be aware that it was nine o'clock, and that they were very hungry. They had just sat down to a substantial cold supper, and Edgar was again endeavouring to ascertain from Edwin how the accident happened, and wondering at the irritation his brother displayed about the matter, when the door-bell rang violently, and in a few minutes the old butler threw open the door, and announced,

“Sir Clement Wychwood.”



CHAPTER IV.

What trick, what device, what starting-hole canst thou now find out to hide thee from this open and apparent shame.

Henry IV. Part i, Act 2, Scene 4.

BOTH brothers rose in surprise and dismay. The appearance of Sir Clement on the scene was naturally somewhat bewildering, as no one had had any idea of his intention of visiting the manor. It had often occurred before that he had arrived quite unexpectedly, but this was certainly a most unpropitious moment.

"Is Dr. Barford in?" was his question, after the first greetings were over. "No. Then

can I see Miss Barford? I want to see my little girl at once."

"I will go and fetch Aunt Milly," said Edwin, with alacrity.

Somehow, now that Sir Clement had appeared upon the scene, he felt less confident that his share in Mignonette's accident would escape discovery.

"How in the world did it happen?" asked Sir Clement, when he was left alone with Edgar. "I arrived about three hours ago, and heard the child was out for the day nutting, with you and your brother, and that the governess was spending the day here. I began to think it was very strange they did not come home, and was strolling down here to see what was the reason, when I met Raven and mademoiselle. She was incoherent, and almost hysterical, and he was so engaged in impressing upon me that there was *only* a broken arm, whereas he had feared concussion of the brain, that I could only make out that Mignonette had fallen into the river, but nothing about how or why."

"I'm afraid I cannot enlighten you," said

Edgar. "I had run to the house," and he detailed all the circumstances of how he had left Mignonette, and had only returned to see Edwin spring into the water after her.

"Well, your brother can tell us, at all events," said Sir Clement. "Very wrong of mademoiselle not to have accompanied you. She had no business to let the child go roving about alone with a couple of school-boys. However, she is going, so it is of no use reproaching her."

School-boys! Edgar felt very indignant. Could a greater insult be imagined to a young man of twenty, who somewhat plumed himself on looking even older than he really was? However, he made allowance for Sir Clement's natural irritation at the state in which he found his daughter, and answered quietly,

"Poor mademoiselle did remonstrate, but we had always done it before; and Mignonette wished it so much that we got Aunt Milly to persuade her."

"I should have thought Miss Barford had been wiser," said Sir Clement, rising to greet



that lady as she at that moment entered the room.

"Mignonette is awake, Sir Clement," she said. "And, I am sorry to say, she has heard your voice, and is quite excited. It would have been better, if we could have kept her quiet just for to-night; but, as it is, will you come at once? I am so glad you are come home."

They went upstairs together, and Miss Barford paused before entering the room.

"You will not stay very long," she said, earnestly. "Dr. Raven was most anxious the child should get to sleep as soon as possible."

Sir Clement promised, and they entered the room, Mignonette, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling with an excitement that boded ill for a quiet night, lay watching the door, her uninjured arm tightly clasping Tippet, who nestled closely to her.

"Oh, papa! papa! I am so glad!" she cried, as he came up to the bedside and kissed her. "I feel so much better; I am sure I shall be quite able to come home to-morrow. It would be too dreadful to be away when you are at



home; though dear Miss Barford is so kind to me and makes me so comfortable. Oh! I wish this had happened any other time."

"How did it happen, dear?" asked her father, stroking her flushed cheek, and seeing, for the first time, a transient and undefinable likeness to her mother, which gave him a curious thrill of mingled pain and pleasure.

"It was when Tippet barked," said the child. "I had unfastened him at last, and we had got back half way along the tree—you know, it wasn't so easy going backwards; and I had only one hand, because I had to hold him—and something made him bark, and I suppose I started, and lost my balance; for I felt the water, and then nothing more till there was a funny, aching, burning pain in my left arm, and I awoke here."

"But, my dear child, what on earth were you and Tippet doing in a tree?" asked Sir Clement, in a bewildered tone. "Tippet isn't a monkey—he couldn't surely have climbed there!"

"Oh! no; it was Edwin," said Mignonette. "It was to tease me, I suppose; and he never

did like Tippet because he never would go to him as he does to Edgar. I heard him howling, and could not think what was the matter, and at last I found him tied, hanging by his body from the tree far over the water. I couldn't bear it, and I crawled along and let him loose, but I couldn't bear to let him fall into the water, he does hate it so, and he had been so frightened and miserable; so I tried to carry him back, and if he hadn't barked it would have been all right."

Miss Barford, horror-struck, looked at Sir Clement.

"I hadn't an idea of this," she said. "Neither, I am quite sure, had Edgar."

"You must let me talk to your nephews," said Sir Clement, very quietly, but looking extremely stern. "Mignonette, my child, I am going now, and you must go to sleep, and try to be bright and well to-morrow morning. Poor Tippet! Poor little fellow!" as he stroked the Skye's silky head. "Lie still, and don't disturb your mistress."

"We had the greatest difficulty in getting

him out of her arms," said Miss Barford, as, Sir Clement having kissed his little girl, they left the room, and went slowly downstairs; "he was pressed so closely to her, as if she were defending him, and he was the first thing she asked for. Poor dear little child! I am more than grieved that Edwin had any hand in causing the accident."

"Let me speak to them, will you?" said Sir Clement, turning into the library. "I would rather see them alone, if you don't object."

Very stern Sir Clement looked, as he stood before the fire awaiting the entrance of the brothers. He was a tall, striking-looking man, with marked features, and large, deep-grey eyes, much like his daughter's, under somewhat projecting brows. Sorrow had traced deep lines in his face, which it was evident must at one time have been extremely handsome; and he had a certain restlessness of manner, as if he were always trying to escape from himself. And this was the case. Ever since he had lost his Mignon,—whom he had vainly loved so long, and only obtained possession of to lose



her after one year of such happiness as even he had never dreamed of,—Sir Clement's life had been one constant endeavour to escape from thought. He had travelled into every corner of Europe, however little known to the ordinary tourist; he had shot buffalo in the West, and lived with the ostrich-hunters in Patagonia, and with ivory-hunters in Zanzibar; and, though each journey proved unavailing to produce forgetfulness, he yet ever started on a new one with fresh hope. He had contrived to work himself up into quite an excitement about his forthcoming Indian tour, and to persuade himself that, in the "glorious East," where not sport alone, but the ruins and traces of an early civilization would be presented to his notice, he might, if only for a time, stifle the memory of that short-lived happiness which he could never again hope to taste.

But as he stood in the rectory library, and reflected on the peril which his little girl had that day escaped, the thought for the first time came to him of a home with her when she was older, of the possibility that, under such circum-

stances, he might be able to do what he well knew to be his duty, and once more take up his abode at Wychwood. Of course it would be painful. Still, perhaps, with Mignonette, it might be endurable. How strange that look of her mother, so transient yet so vivid! Colouring and features were both so different, it seemed almost impossible that there could be a likeness; and yet without a doubt he had seen it. Doubtless it was that which made the child that night seem so doubly dear to him—that and the imminent peril in which he had been of losing her. He must make some fresh arrangements. These French governesses that his sister selected never stayed, and they could neither know nor care much about the child. Some new method must be tried; and, just as he had reached this point of his meditations, Edgar and Edwin entered the room.

Sir Clement had been so little at home that he hardly knew them by sight, and he fairly started at the extraordinary likeness between them.

“Pray which of you is Edwin?” he asked.



"It is really impossible to recognize which of you it was I talked to a little while ago."

"I am Edwin," said that young gentleman, somewhat unwillingly.

"Oh! then as you did not go to the house with your brother, can you tell me anything about the accident?"

"I heard a scream, and saw Mignonette fall into the water, and I rushed in and pulled her out. She wasn't in more than a minute, and, if she hadn't broken her arm, she would have been all right."

"Unfortunately, however, she did. You say she fell into the water; where did she fall from?"

"The trunk of a tree that hangs over the river," said Edwin, not at all liking this cross-examination.

"A strange place, surely! What was she doing there?"

"Oh! she's a great hand at scrambling about everywhere. Edgar found her sitting in a tree overhanging the river the other day; didn't you, Edgar?"



"Yes; but it was much nearer home."

"Evidently Mademoiselle Lassalle has neglected her pupil strangely. Then you know nothing of Mignonette's motive in this scramble?"

"I suppose she did it for a lark."

"And you saw her on this overhanging trunk. Was it not odd she should have had her dog in her arm? Miss Barford tells me she held him so tightly it was almost impossible to take him from her. Why should she have taken him into a tree?"

Edwin was silent, and Edgar suggested,

"That puzzled me. Perhaps Tippet jumped in to try to help her when he saw her fall, and she caught hold of him."

"You were not on the spot, Mr. Barford, and it appears your brother was; I think he must be able to tell us something."

Edwin was still silent. He began to fancy Sir Clement knew something; but surely Mignonette could not have told him all, and as soon as she was visible he would get her to be

silent—she was always a good-natured little thing.

“Did you hear any howls from Tippet?” asked Sir Clement.

Edwin started involuntarily.

“Ah! I see you did. Then probably Mignonette is not feverish and imaginative, as I would gladly have believed. Her story is that you had tied her pet to a tree hanging over the river, and that, hearing his howls, she crept, at her own peril, along the tree and liberated him. Her fond, pitiful little heart would not let her allow her poor frightened favourite to fall into the water, which he so dreaded, so she strove to carry him back, and her accident was the result.”

“It surely can’t be true!” cried Edgar, impetuously. “Edwin, speak out and say it isn’t.”

But Edwin remained silent.

“I fancy your brother cannot deny it,” said Sir Clement. “Can you?” to Edwin; but there was no response.

“Oh, Sir Clement,” cried Edgar, almost in



tears, "I am so sorry, so ashamed! Poor, dear little Mignonette! What must you think of us?"

"I have no reason to think anything but what is good of *you*," said Sir Clement, who knew enough of human nature to see plainly how very deep and sincere the young man's distress was; "as to your brother, I am sorry to say it of your father's son, but a more disgraceful and cowardly action I never heard of. To torment a harmless and defenceless animal is bad enough; but to allow a little helpless child, who could not endure to see her pet's terror and suffering, to risk her life as Mignonette did, is as cowardly a piece of heartlessness as I ever heard of. It is not a mere piece of schoolboy thoughtlessness—it is far worse, and shows a thoroughly bad heart. And you meant," turning to Edwin, "to conceal it; if Mignonette had not told what had happened, you would never have disclosed how she met with her accident. Well, perhaps it was more than could have been expected of you; a coward seldom is truthful. I hope, for your father's

sake, you may improve; but the boy is father to the man, and I fear there is but little chance that you will ever be of much comfort or credit to him. For myself, I can only say that willingly—that is to say, knowingly—I will never speak to you again, or allow Mignonette to do so. For you,” turning to Edgar, “I am truly sorry; it is sad for you to have a brother of whom you must be so cordially ashamed. This will make no difference in my friendly feeling to every member of the family excepting the one who has forfeited all claim to it. Good night. Tell your aunt I shall come down early to-morrow,” and shaking hands with Edgar, but without a glance at Edwin, Sir Clement left the room.

“What a row about nothing!” said Edwin, who was determined, now all had been discovered, to brazen the matter out.

“Nothing?—you call it nothing?” said Edgar. “But there! it is pretty clear you didn’t really think so, or you wouldn’t have been ashamed to tell the story, and have varicated so when Dr. Raven and I asked you

about the accident. I never expected to be so ashamed of you, Edwin! I couldn't have believed you were such a cur!"

"That's the worst of having anything to do with girls," observed Edwin; "they're always sneaks and tell-tales. Why couldn't that mischief-making little cat hold her tongue?"

"Why on earth should she? You've always been as unkind to her as you could, teasing her, or—what to her is far worse—her pets."

"I wish I'd hanged that brute of a dog, instead of only tying him over the water!"

"I'm sure I heartily wish he'd bitten you. It'd have served you about right."

"Perhaps I'll pay him and her out yet."

"Luckily, you won't have much chance. Sir Clement has the reputation of meaning what he says, and he made it pretty clear that you would have no further communication with Wychwood."

"Oh! of course that's all nonsense—just a flash in the pan at first. He'll forget all about such a trifle before he comes here again. I shouldn't at all wonder if he speaks to me,



when he comes down to-morrow morning, just as if nothing had happened. People often sleep off their bad tempers."

But Sir Clement did not fulfil Edwin's expectations. It certainly was not easy for him to distinguish the two brothers, and for a moment he hesitated, but the expression of the two faces enlightened him, and shaking hands cordially with Edgar, he passed Edwin without notice.

Mignonette had not had a good night, and was rather feverish, and Dr. Raven would not hear of her being moved.

"You will stay with me a little, papa, won't you?" she asked, coaxingly; "it would be so pleasant, and I will be so quiet. But perhaps you would not like it?" and she looked up anxiously.

"I will stay with pleasure, my little girl, if you would like to have me," said Sir Clement, kissing her. "I will send a note to Mr. McDonald to tell him not to wait for me, and then we will have a comfortable quiet morning."

When the note was despatched, he returned

to the bedside, and announced to his little girl that he had that morning dismissed Mademoiselle Lassalle. Mignonette gave a sigh of relief.

"I hope the next won't cut up the lessons into little bits, so that I can never get far from the house."

"But, my dear child, that is the very thing I do not wish you to do. It is not safe for you to go wandering about alone, and sitting on trees overhanging the water, and scrambling in dangerous places. I never had an idea you went out without your nurse or governess. It must not happen again."

Mignonette's face fell.

"But, papa, I always have, and none of the governesses ever go out walking, and Aunt Matilda always makes such a point of my being so much in the open air."

"But, my dear, there is open air in the garden, and, unless there is some one with you, you must be content to stay there in safety. I will talk to your aunt when I go back to London, and perhaps we can find a governess



who is not averse to fresh air and exercise."

"But it is so nice to be alone, and to get away from mademoiselle."

"All mademoiselles are not alike, and besides, my little Mignonette, the things we like are not always those that are the best for us. I cannot allow you to go wandering about by yourself."

"But, papa, no harm has ever happened to me."

"My dear, I daresay you have heard the proverb about the pitcher that went so often safely to the well, but was broken at last. Besides, my dear child, remember you *are* a child, and must let others settle what is best for you."

"Yes, papa, of course," said Mignonette, submissively, but with a weight at her heart that he would have found it hard to understand.

Destitute of companionship and sympathy as the child had been all her life, she had unwittingly made a friend of Nature, and the wild woodland scenes were more to her taste than were the clipped hedges, bright flower-beds,

and trim lawns of the formal gardens for which Wychwood Manor was so famous. To Sir Clement this would have been incomprehensible; the child wanted to be out of doors, and to play in the open air rather than in the rooms and passages—thus much he could and did understand—but that there should be any difference to her between the garden or the wood, or that she was old enough to appreciate the difference between wild natural scenery and somewhat stiff cultivation, was quite beyond him. To his idea a child was only able to understand anything specially explained to it in easy terms, and its whole duty lay in learning its lessons and doing what it was told. He had a vague idea that girls remained children till they were seventeen, and then became women by the simple process of having their frocks lengthened, and being presented at Court. He would have been first incredulous, and then bewildered, had he been told one tithe of the books Mignonette had read, or of the curious meditations which she had made upon them; and it was rather the supposition that of course



she had as many toys as she wanted, as her aunt would be sure to know what was requisite, that prevented his bringing her a doll, than any notion that it would not be acceptable, or that she thought herself too old for it. So it was without the slightest idea of the heaviness of the doom he had pronounced upon her that he cheerfully continued :

“I am sure the garden is much prettier and pleasanter than the woods, and you will always be able to run in at once when it rains.”

“Yes,” said Mignonette, so dolefully that her father, fancying she was getting tired, said he should leave her for a little, and she must be a good girl, and try to sleep. She promised to try, and then added,

“And when I am awake again, papa, may Edgar come and see me? I do want to see him so; and when I asked Miss Barford she said she must see what you would say.”

Sir Clement looked surprised.

“My dear, what can you want to see him for?”

“Oh, papa, I am so fond of him ! He is the

only person I have ever had really to talk to, and I haven't seen him for a whole year until the other day, and then I shouldn't, only, luckily, mademoiselle had the *migraine*, and I was able to get away for the day, and sit in the dear birch-tree over the river. And he told me I mustn't sit there again, because I couldn't keep my hat on there, and I should get burnt, and freckled, and ugly; and he made me promise to wear gloves, only he let me leave them off yesterday for a treat for the nutting."

"Well, well, my dear, if it will amuse you while you are laid up here, he may come and talk to you for a little while. I will tell Miss Barford so. But remember, Mignonette," and he turned round, looking so stern that the child, who had never seen him angry, was almost terrified. "Remember what I say. You are never again to speak to his brother Edwin. Do you understand?"

"Never to speak to Edwin, papa. Why?"

"My dear Mignonette, I have given you an order, and you ought to know it is your duty



to obey without asking questions. Edwin Barford has proved himself cruel, cowardly, and untruthful; and he is a person I do not choose to know myself, or to allow you to know either. I forbid you to speak to him at any time or under any circumstances. Do you understand what I say?"

"Yes, papa, I will do what you say. But—"

"My dear, little girls should not argue; their business is to do what they are told. I have given you an order, and you must obey it; there is nothing more to be said about the matter. Now go to sleep," and Sir Clement left the room.

Any chance which there might have been of Mignonette's sleeping had been effectually prevented by her father's conversation. The idea of being confined henceforth to the garden—excepting when walking with her governess, who would of course expect her to walk sedately at her side, or with nurse, who would forbid all scrambling and exploring in the interest of her clothes—seemed to the poor little child, who had hitherto enjoyed such unusual liberty, like

being condemned to imprisonment. And then the command that she was never to speak to Edwin again! Of course she must obey; but how difficult it would be! How should she manage? What must she do when he spoke to her? Certainly she did not like him; he was always unkind to her, and he had been cruel, oh! more than cruel to dearest Tippet. It was not that she was so sorry, but that she felt so shy of the awkwardness which she foresaw. Oh!—with a start of relief—she would tell Edgar, and get him to ask Edwin not to speak to her; then of course it would be all right, and she lay expecting his appearance more anxiously than ever.

When at length Edgar came, Mignonette was quite at a loss to understand why he seemed so out of spirits. She by no means understood that it was on account of his treatment of herself and Tippet that she had been forbidden ever again to speak to Edwin, and she naturally knew nothing of Dr. Barford's grief and indignation on his return that morning. She only thought that Edgar was vexed that she



was not to speak to Edwin, and assured him again and again that it was not her fault, but that papa had said she must do what he told her. So great was her anxiety to assure him on this point that she quite forgot to tell him of her sad prospects in the way of the curtailment of her liberties, and, quite worn out with her excitement, fell asleep as soon as he had left her.

CHAPTER V.

Whiles you beguile the time and feed your knowledge
With viewing of the town.

Twelfth Night. Act 3, Scene 3.

TWO or three days elapsed before Mignonette was well enough for Dr. Raven to sanction her returning home. During the time she spent at the rectory she grew excessively fond of Miss Barford. That she did so was not to be wondered at: "Aunt Milly" was an ideal nurse, and her pity for the lonely little child, added to her sincere sorrow that the accident should have been due to her nephew's misconduct, rendered her even more tender than was her wont. Mignonette saw Edgar every day, indeed he spent a great portion of his time in



trying to amuse her, sometimes offending her by suggesting what she despised as childish pastimes, and frequently astonished at the curiously grown-up and old-fashioned way in which she often talked of things which would have been incomprehensible to most children of her age. Edwin never appeared. Sir Clement had said very little to either Doctor or Miss Barford, but he had made his determination clear that he would neither notice nor speak to him himself, nor suffer his daughter to do so; and, though Dr. Barford thought this unnecessarily severe, he knew Sir Clement too well to imagine that, for the present at any rate, there was any chance of his reversing his decision. So, feeling how difficult it would be for Mignonette to obey her father's wishes and to avoid speaking to Edwin if she saw him, they took special care that he should not meet her, and Miss Barford observed that the child never asked about him, and quite shrank when she once or twice heard his voice, which Tippet saluted with an angry growl.

When at length Mignonette returned home,



the accident of there being no governess in charge caused her to be more with her father when he was in the house, than had ever before been the case; and, convinced as Sir Clement was that she was quite a child, almost a baby, he could not help being occasionally struck with surprise at some of her questions and remarks. Mignonette had been quite right when she had told Edgar that her father had never realised that the words and names she pronounced at intervals when he was talking to himself really came from her; as she had, with quick, childish instinct divined, they had seemed to him to be only a part of his own thoughts, which he was frequently quite unconscious of uttering aloud. But now that the child was more with him, and that her accident had caused him to observe her with anxiety, he could not help being struck by the intelligence of her remarks, and by the way in which she invariably studied the newspaper.

“Does that amuse you, my dear?” he said one day, on finding her hidden behind the *Times*, which she was apparently studying with



much diligence ; "or is it only that you have no story-books ? I will tell your aunt to send you some more."

"I don't care very much for story-books," said Mignonette ; "what Aunt Matilda sends are always about little boys and girls, and they don't amuse me. I like books about grown-up people, and I used to read some out of the library ; but Mademoiselle Deffand—she was the last but three, you know, papa—said they were novels, and not fit for little girls, so I have never read any more."

"Well, my dear," said Sir Clement, with a recollection that in his extensive and perhaps rather miscellaneous library there were many volumes decidedly unsuited to his little daughter's perusal, "I think Mademoiselle Deffand was right. Still there are some you might read—the Waverley novels, for instance. Perhaps you wouldn't quite understand them all ; but at any rate, they could do you no harm. I will get them out for you ; I thought you must be very dull to take to the *Times*."

"Oh ! but it is not that," said Mignonette ;

"I know you read it, and I like to try to understand what you are thinking and reading about. Of course I don't understand it all, but I do a little, and then perhaps I can be useful sometimes in remembering names and words for you."

Sir Clement was both touched and astonished.

"Did you really think of that of yourself, little one?" he said—"I mean, did no one suggest it to you?"

"No—no one," said Mignonette, rather surprised. "You know I never have anyone I can talk to about you except Edgar, and I don't see so much of him now as I used to do, and he has been away for a whole year."

In his heart Sir Clement thought that there seemed at one time to have been rather too much intercourse between the Manor House and the Rectory. Without the companionship of the young Barfords, Mignonette could hardly have got into the wild, scrambling habits which he was now determined must be repressed. But he did not choose to express any disapproval. He had put a stop to any intercourse



between his child and the boy who had endangered her life, and, besides, at their age, neither he nor his brother was likely to be much at home. Both were at Oxford preparatory to going, Edgar into the diplomatic service, Edwin to the Bar; and their professions would keep them away from Wychwood. If he said anything to the girl about not seeing them so much, it would probably put it into her head to think it a hardship that she was to be deprived of her only companions, whereas if nothing were said, their avocations would keep them away as a matter of course, and she would never think anything about their absence. Besides, he fully intended that she should have a different sort of governess, some one more responsible and authoritative than the French ladies his sister seemed to have selected. The truth was, he had never given a thought to the fact that the girl was no longer a mere baby, for whom a good nurse was almost the only requisite. Mignonette was very slight and small of her age, and it had never occurred to him how swiftly the years were gliding away

or he might not perhaps have so contentedly left the matter in Mrs. Davenant's hands, for he had not a very high opinion of her judgment. But he had fancied that of course she knew better what was required for babies than he did, and had really only just awoke with a start to the fact that Mignonette was more than eleven years old, that a little more than three months would see her enter her "teens." Of course a change was requisite at once.

"Mignonette," he said, after a considerable pause, "would you like to come to London with me and see your aunt and cousins?"

"I should like to go anywhere with you, papa."

Mignonette had had no one to tell her of London sights; her various instructresses had never expatiated on its delights, though they had told her much of the beauties of Paris, and she had never read anything that gave a specially attractive view of the metropolis; so she had none of the longing desire to see its wonders common to most children of her age.

Sir Clement was rather disappointed; he had



expected her to be almost wild with delight, and yet he could not help being touched by the answer, which showed such affection for himself. If he had not so completely settled this expedition to India, he said to himself that he would have tried to live for a time at Wychwood, and make further acquaintance with his little daughter. Ah! well, it was too late to think of that. All his arrangements were made, and his passage taken in the *Indus* in three weeks from the present time. When he came back he really would endeavour to settle down quietly at home, and attend to his estate and his child. Meanwhile he would take her to town with him; perhaps her aunt had forgotten her age as completely as he had, and would, when she saw her, be impressed with the necessity of finding a governess who would not allow her charge to wander in the woods at her own sweet will.

Nurse was naturally delighted at the prospect of such unwonted dissipation, and from her Mignonette heard for the first time descriptions of sights and glories that made her run to her father for confirmation of all the delighted

anticipations which it had disappointed him that she had not at first indulged in. But it surprised him to notice the things that she most wished to see. The Tower and Westminster Abbey came far before the Zoological Gardens or the Conjurer, which he imagined would have been so infinitely more attractive at her age; and, when he hinted at the possibility of the theatre, she at once chose the one where a play of Shakespeare's was being given, instead of the one where there was a Fairy Extravaganza. Altogether, now that he had once begun really to think about her, she interested and surprised him so much that he found himself more and more constantly regretting that his Indian tour was irrevocably settled. Perhaps, if he had not been pledged to two companions, he might even now have changed his mind, and spent the winter at Wychwood.

Mrs. Davenant was much astonished when her brother wrote not only to say he was going to bring up Mignonette, but also to beg that she would take no steps about another governess until his arrival. She was used to

his always making her house his head-quarters during his visits to London, but the child's visit was quite out of the usual groove, and therefore disconcerted her altogether. And what, she wondered plaintively, could Sir Clement think he knew about governesses that he should forbid her to engage one—just, too, as she had all but made arrangements with such a nice French lady! Mademoiselle Lassalle had paid her a visit, and poured forth a torrent of indignation at her abrupt dismissal, and Mrs. Davenant was fully prepared to declare to her brother that she had been very ill-used; quite oblivious, as Mademoiselle Lassalle also chose to be, of the fact that she had herself given notice of her intention of leaving, and was only waiting till Mrs. Davenant's return to town enabled her to find another lady to take her place.

During the days that he had spent alone with Mignonette, Sir Clement had asked many questions, and had discovered that his sister had remained steadily in one groove, and having on the first occasion sent down a superior



nursery-governess, had gone on supplying varieties of the same article without any recollection of the fact that Mignonette was growing older, and required more advanced instructresses. From what he elicited, it appeared to him that the greater part of what the child knew she had learnt for herself by somewhat promiscuous reading. Mrs. Davenant, when he quietly told her all this, was quite bewildered.

"But, my dear Clement, Mademoiselle Blondin, her first governess, was such a success! Of course, I have always tried to get some one exactly like her."

"That was rather over seven years ago, Matilda. Don't your own children grow older?"

"Of course they do, Clement. How funny you are, to be sure! Why, you must notice how Ada has grown and improved; she is——"

"I quite see it, Matilda; but Ada isn't in question now, but Mignonette. She is nearly twelve years old, and I want, not a French nursery-governess, but an English lady, who can not only teach, but influence the child.



She has got into the way of wandering about the woods like a little savage."

"My dear Clement, that is essential. You know what a point Sir Caulfield Carluke made of her being as much as possible in the open air."

"Yes, when she was delicate seven years ago. Besides, open air doesn't necessitate climbing trees, and all sorts of tomboyish proceedings. Those Frenchwomen hated fresh air, and left her to go out alone. It's a miracle she has never broken her neck."

"I'm sure," said Mrs. Davenant, in an ag-grieved tone, "you made such a point of a Frenchwoman, and of her learning the language young."

"Of course ; but having learnt it, there is no reason for going on with French governesses, more especially nursery-governesses, for ever."

"But I had almost engaged another."

"Disengage yourself, then."

"But what am I to say?"

"Oh, don't ask me—women always know how to get out of things."



"I'm sure I don't," said poor Mrs. Davenant, almost crying in her bewilderment at this sudden *bouleversement* of all her ideas. If she had been left to herself, she would have gone on finding nursery governesses for Mignonette till she was eighteen. She could realize that her own children were growing up, because she saw them, and they made their increasing age known and felt; but it was beyond the power of her somewhat feeble brain to understand that a child she never saw really grew older quite as fast as they. She felt quite aggrieved: her brother seemed to be finding fault with her when she had done her very best.

"Now, Matilda, would this governess you say you have half engaged suit Ida?"

"Ida!—of course not; she is much more advanced."

"She ought not to be more advanced than Mignonette; she is three months younger."

Perhaps such a statistical remark did more to convince Mrs. Davenant that her niece was no longer a baby than anything else could have done.



"Well," she said, "I suppose I must make some excuse about your fancying an English governess."

"I want one who will be likely to stay more than six months. No one can influence or control the child who is a mere bird of passage."

"I'm sure"—dolefully—"I should be only too glad if they *would* stay. It takes up half my time to find governesses for Wychwood. But, you see, it is so dull: it is more than anyone can stand, that great, lonely, empty house."

"It will not always be empty."

"But how? You are always away."

"I always have been certainly; but I need not always be so. Indeed, if I were not pledged to Bemorton and Gresham, I think I should give up this Indian trip, and stay at home now. However, it is too late for that now; but I shall settle down when I come back."

A brilliant idea struck Mrs. Davenant.

"Don't you think it would be an excellent thing, and would save a great deal of trouble,

if you left Mignonette at school while you are away? I know an excellent one—where Lady Rachel Varstone and Lady Dormouth send their girls, and——”

“It might save trouble; but there is nothing I should dislike more. Girls learn to giggle, and to talk nonsense about lovers, and all sorts of rubbish. No; you must find a suitable person. And now I am going to take Mignonette to Westminster Abbey.”

The fortnight that Mignonette spent in London was the happiest time she had ever known, the only drawback being the necessary confinement of her arm in a sling, and the thought that every day brought nearer her parting with her father. Every day which she spent with him added to her devotion, and Sir Clement himself was quite astonished to find what a companion she was to him, and how he had grown to dread the impending parting. He saw more of London in that fortnight than he had ever done before; for the child was indefatigable in her desire to see every place mentioned in history, and was often terribly disap-



pointed to find that all traces of the things she wished to see had disappeared. She did not very much care for the company of her cousins. Unaccustomed to the society of children, she had no ideas in common with them, and thought Ida, who was her contemporary, very childish; while Ada, who was fifteen, gave herself airs, and thought eleven too young to talk to. The boys were away at school, with the exception of the youngest, Hector, who was only seven, and who, being his mother's darling and terribly spoilt, certainly did not add to his cousin's comfort, as he was always playing disagreeable practical jokes; being delighted with a fresh victim who was unused to them, to whom they were painful, and who had not, like his sisters, learnt methods of prevention or evasion. The girl never complained, or Sir Clement would very soon have put a stop to his nephew's amusements; but the only thing that gave Mignonette the least pleasure, when she thought of returning to Wychwood, was the recollection that there she should at any rate be secure from Hector.

To satisfy his sister that there was really no longer any necessity for the girl running wild all day out of doors, Sir Clement took her to Sir Caulfield Carluke, who at once assured him that all great delicacy had passed away, and that there was not the least necessity for any special treatment.

The idea of a new governess had no terror for Mignonette—she was so used to change that she thought nothing of it; but she was very grievously dismayed at the tidings that her liberty of rambling was to be curtailed. The woods would be no pleasure, she thought, if the governess were to be ever at her elbow: half her enjoyment had been in the absolute freedom of her solitary wanderings. However, if papa said so, of course it must be, and she set herself steadily to forget all the sweetness of her former liberty.

A lady, Miss Ashstead, had been found, who quite satisfied Sir Clement. She was a clergyman's daughter, and had been specially trained with a view to tuition, instead of merely adopting it as a means of livelihood, without either



aptitude or due preparation. She had a pleasing expression, and a gentle, firm manner that greatly impressed Sir Clement, and he was very glad when, after she had been introduced to Mignonette, the child said to him, when they were alone,

"I think I shall like Miss Ashstead, papa. I like her face better than any of my mesdemoiselles. She looks as if she would be always the same."

"She says she has no fear of dulness," said Mrs. Davenant, to her brother, the same evening. "I'm sure I hope it's true, and that she will stay, at any rate, till you come back. I quite dread the responsibility of another change."

"I daresay she will."

"Oh, Clement, what a good thing it would be if you would marry again! You will never settle down comfortably until you do."

She was almost frightened when she had said it; her brother's face grew so dark. He walked several times up and down the room, as if



afraid of trusting himself to reply, and then came and stood before her.

"Never say that again, Matilda," he said, sternly. "You know how my Mignon was the dream of my life; how I waited for her, and she for me—hopeless as our love seemed, and great as was the persecution to which she was exposed. You know, too, how great our happiness was when it came, and how cruelly short a time it lasted; and that the only reason why I have wandered so long has been that I could not bear the Manor House when it was deprived of the light of her presence. And yet you speak of my marrying again—as if it were possible, as if I could for a moment bear the thought of *her* place being taken by another! If, indeed, I could see her like! But the very thought is desecration! Never refer to it again."

"It would be such a good thing for Mignonette," was all Mrs. Davenant ventured to say, but her brother made no reply, and she had not the courage to renew the conversation, though



she talked often on the subject to her intimate friends, and deplored greatly that Sir Clement "was still so infatuated about poor dear Mignon—a charming creature, of course, she had been very fond of her, but still he might find plenty of other people as charming and as suitable, and it would be such a great thing for his poor dear little girl!"

Of course the friends agreed with her, and those who had daughters called in Harley Street, and invited Mrs. Davenant to dinner, begging her to bring her brother, but without result; Sir Clement chose to devote his evenings to Mignonette.

One day, as they were walking down Bond Street, they met the two young Barfords, who were on their way back to Oxford. If he had been alone, Sir Clement would probably have passed on without speaking, but Mignonette sprang forward with both hands extended to Edgar, and with a dozen questions on her lips. How were Dr. Barford and dear Aunt Milly? She had learnt to call her so when ill at the rectory. Had he seen Tippet? The house-

keeper wrote to nurse that he whined all day long, and could hardly be persuaded to leave his mistress's bed. Should he be at home at Christmas this year?—and would he remember his promise of teaching her to skate? So eager was she that she never once glanced at Edwin, and he, after waiting a moment, and seeing that Sir Clement had not the slightest intention of noticing him, slipped his arm out of his brother's, and began to take considerable interest in a shop window. When he was gone Sir Clement's manner became less stiff, and when, at last, he told Mignonette that he could not wait any longer, he shook hands with Edgar very cordially.

"I am glad to see, Mignonette," he said, as they went on together down Bruton Street, "that you remembered what I told you, and did not attempt to speak to Mr. Edwin Barford."

Mignonette stopped short, and looked up at her father.

"It—it wasn't that I remembered what you said," she said, frankly; "I am afraid I had



quite forgotten. It was only that I was so glad to see Edgar that I quite forgot Edwin."

"I am glad it so happened, anyhow," said Sir Clement, vexed at her confession of forgetfulness, but yet pleased at her candour in not accepting praise that was not her due; truthfulness was the quality which, of all others, he most prized, and probably, had Edwin manfully owned what he had done, without trying to pretend he knew nothing of what had happened, his condemnation of him would have been less severe. "But, my dear little girl, you must try to recollect what I tell you; and I repeat, and expect you to remember, that, under no circumstances, are you ever to speak to him. Nay, no words," as he saw Mignonette was about to reply. "I have given you an order, and you only have to obey."

The happy fortnight came to an end, as it seemed to Mignonette, almost as soon as it had begun. The day came when Sir Clement was to start for Southampton, and, having wished him good-bye, sobbing as if her heart would break, Mignonette, accompanied by Miss Ash-



stead, set off for Wychwood, the sole element of comfort to her being that Hector was left behind.

CHAPTER VI.

Ay, when the special thing is well obtained,
That is—her love ; for that is all in all.

Taming of the Shrew. Act 2, Scene 1.

Where syrens sit, to sing thee to thy fate.

YOUNG's Night Thoughts.

THE Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamer *Benares* had left Calcutta some days, and the passengers had had time to look at each other carefully, in some instances to fraternise, and in others to conceive a violent and frequently causeless animosity. But it was the first time that a gentleman, who was evidently very ill, had made his appearance on deck, and the event was quite a godsend to those who were already tired of the monotony

of the voyage. He had been carried up on deck, and laid on a couch in the most shady spot that could be found by his servant and one of the stewards, and he lay there with his eyes closed, apparently exhausted by the fatigue of the removal from his berth. The heat was very great, and presently he became aware that some one had approached, and was gently fanning him. Slowly opening his eyes, they rested on a lady, dazzlingly fair, and with soft blue eyes, which were fixed upon him.

"I hope I have not disturbed you?" she said, with the sweetest of smiles.

"On the contrary, I am most grateful; but you must not trouble yourself. My servant—" and he strove to look round.

"Your servant has gone, I fancy, to his dinner, and indeed it is no trouble; I have nothing to do, and am very glad to make myself useful."

"It is most kind of you—I cannot deny that it is a very great boon; the cooling air is most reviving."

"I think, if you will let me, I can make you



more comfortable. Let me raise your head; there," as she deftly shook up the pillows, "I am sure that is better."

"Indeed it is. You are an accomplished nurse."

"I have had much practice," with a deep sigh. "My poor husband was an invalid," and she looked away sadly over the sea.

Her companion noticed that she wore deep mourning, though not widow's weeds.

"I beg your pardon," he said, gently; "I fear I have revived sad memories."

"At any rate, I need not trouble you with them," she said, with a sad smile; "but does not it tire you to talk? I should be so grieved if I made you worse."

"No, indeed; I feel all the better for it. You cannot think what a relief it is to have some one to speak to besides the doctor."

"You have been long ill, I suppose, or you would not be so weak?"

He put his hand before his eyes.

"It seems an eternity—I almost forget how long; but it has been a bad attack of fever. I

was laid up with it first at Agra, and then when I got to Calcutta I had a relapse which was worse than the first attack."

"Ah! I know; it very often is."

"You speak as if you had had experience."

"Yes, indeed; my husband, Colonel Roston, died of it last year."

"I beg your pardon."

"Nay—why should you? Time has enabled me to speak of my loss calmly, though it is irreparable. Do you suffer much from thirst?"

"Yes—terribly."

Mrs. Roston rose, and in a few minutes returned to his side with a large tumbler of seltzer-water and lemon-juice, in which was a huge lump of ice.

"It is delicious," he exclaimed, after a prolonged draught. "You are too good to me."

"I think," she said, smiling, "that I must constitute myself your nurse during the voyage." And then, rising, she continued—"You have talked enough for the present; I shall leave you for a little, that you may try to sleep."



She withdrew, and seated herself with a book at some little distance; and the invalid, Sir Clement Wychwood, lay watching her and admiring her finely-cut profile and delicate colouring, until weakness and the heat combined caused him to fall asleep.

Sir Clement's stay in India had been longer than he had at first intended. His original intention was to have been absent about six months, but his stay had, from one inducement or another, been prolonged for more than eighteen, and it was in June of the year but one after his departure from England that he was carried, more dead than alive, on board the *Benares*. The two attacks of fever from which he had suffered had been most severe, and the physician who attended him at Calcutta had at one time completely despaired of his recovery. But an excellent natural constitution, and his remarkably temperate habits, had stood him in good stead; and, as soon as an improvement began to manifest itself, Dr. Jerritt pronounced that a sea-voyage was the best hope for his patient, and shipped him off as quickly as was



possible. In a very few days after Mrs. Roston had installed herself as his nurse, there was a very manifest improvement. The languor inseparable from long and severe illness had laid firm hold of Sir Clement, and it required something to rouse him, which Mrs. Roston's ministrations speedily contrived to do. In a week he was able to walk a little on deck, leaning on her arm, and she declared herself surprised and delighted at his progress, though she declined to accept the credit which he gratefully ascribed to her.

Society on shipboard is apt to be somewhat censorious, as indeed are all small communities; and the intimacy between Sir Clement and his fair nurse did not long escape comment.

"Do you know anything of her?" asked Mrs. Dawson of her great friend on board, Mrs. McDougal.

"I carefully avoided knowing her at Simla, when she was there two years ago," replied Mrs. McDougal, who set up as a dragon of propriety; no one saving Mr. McDougal, who had been attracted by her twenty thousand pounds,



having ever manifested the very least desire to approach her. "She was such a terrible flirt no one was safe from her, though what the men see in her passes my comprehension."

"She is a widow?"

"Yes; Colonel Roston has been dead barely six months, and you see she has left off her weeds, and is already looking out for number two."

"Oh, you shouldn't say that! It is kind of her to devote herself to an invalid, and he is old enough to be her father."

"Not he! She is nine and thirty, if she is a day, though I grant you would not think it to look at her; and as for her kindness—if she was so full of that, and so anxious to be of use, there is that poor boy, young Campbell, who has no one to look after him—he might die before she troubled herself about him."

"Then you think she knew Sir Clement Wychwood before?"

"I *know* she didn't; for I heard her ask who he was when he came on board."



"Then how can you talk of her thinking of him as her future husband?"

"My dear creature, what on earth else do you fancy she is taking all that trouble about him for? Mrs. Roston is a woman who expects to be toadied, and petted, and waited upon, while she turns up those great eyes of hers, and thinks people ought to be grateful to her for just looking at them. If Sir Clement were not a rich baronet and a widower, he might die before she would walk across the deck to save him."

"I think you must be mistaken; she is such a sweet, gentle-looking creature."

"Ah, my dear, so many of your flirts are! If you had seen her at Simla, looking so innocent; and yet she managed to set nearly the whole station by the ears. Poor Colonel Roston! he had a terrible life of it. He was up there for his health, and she left him entirely to himself while she rode and walked with her different adorers. I saw it all, so you may be sure it isn't only 'gup.' As I said before, I would not have anything to say to her."



"Well, I am sure she has added greatly to Sir Clement Wychwood's comfort."

"If he falls into the trap though, and marries her, he may say good-bye to comfort ; and he's pretty sure to do it, I should think ; men always are so helpless when they get into the hands of designing women."

"Well, I suppose we shall know how it will be before we get to Southampton. It is wonderful how much better he seems every day."

It was indeed surprising the progress which Sir Clement was making. Now that he had once fairly taken a turn in the right direction, it really seemed as if every hour showed an improvement. He now hardly needed Mrs. Roston's ministrations, yet he was loth to confess himself so convalescent as to be no longer dependent on her care. She was almost the only person to whom he ever spoke, and he was supremely unconscious of all the observations that were made about them by the other passengers ; equally unconscious was he of the sentiment which was insensibly stealing into his heart respecting her. He believed himself to



be extremely grateful for her kindness, and, of course, much impressed—who could help being so?—with her beauty; but of anything further he, as yet, did not dream. Indeed, if love had been suggested to him, he would have answered as indignantly as when his sister had suggested the propriety of his marrying nearly two years before. But he could not bear to be out of Mrs. Roston's presence. If she were not on deck he was restless and uncomfortable, and paid but scant attention to those who would willingly have consoled him for her absence, and the moment she re-appeared he was once more at her side. She had a soft, sweet voice; she deferred in everything to his judgment, a great charm to Sir Clement, who disliked either loud or self-reliant women; she always amused him, and yet did not talk too much, and, not being fond of children or attractive to them, she served as a sort of barrier against their incursions.

Those who have ever had the misfortune to be in company with children returning from India will appreciate what a boon this was to a



man whose nerves had hardly yet recovered their equilibrium after a long illness. Children in India are, as a rule, most terribly spoilt by the natives, to whose sole care they are generally confided, and when they get together on board ship, and the sea air improves their health and removes the lassitude from which they are suffering when they embark, they become a very terrible infliction to their fellow-travellers. But, happily, children, like dogs, have some instinct which tells them those who cordially dislike them, and Mrs. Roston, though she never said or did anything unkind, or looked otherwise than amiable and placid, was yet left unmolested, and Sir Clement sheltered himself behind her.

"You do not like children?" she said, one day, half laughing at the sigh of relief which he gave as some more than ordinarily obstreperous infants were captured and carried off screaming by their respective ayahs.

"Well, no, not *as* children. I can fancy being fond of any special one belonging to one's

self. I am very fond of my own little girl, for instance."

"Your only child? Yes, I can fancy so, indeed. Tell me about her."

"I suppose she would hardly like to be called quite a child now," said Sir Clement, smiling; "she is fourteen."

"Such an interesting age; just when the mind is showing all its brightest buds of promise. Is she very pretty?"

"No, I hardly think so; but it is almost two years since I saw her, and children change so."

"How I should like to see her!"

"I hope you will. I hope you will come and pay us a visit at Wychwood. I fear there is not much to amuse you, but I can promise a hearty welcome. I shall never forget all I owe you."

"Pray do not say so; you make me feel quite ashamed of the little I did, and which was, I assure you, a pleasure. But I fear far other things are before me than such pleasures as a stay at Wychwood Manor. My poor hus-

band's affairs are, I fear, terribly involved, and I must think of some situation where I can earn enough to keep myself and my boy."

Sir Clement looked horrified.

"Earn!—you!—Mrs. Roston, impossible! Things cannot be so bad as you imagine. If they were, something must be arranged. It is impossible that you can be exposed to any trouble or annoyance."

She shook her head mournfully.

"You are kind to say so, Sir Clement, but I fear it must be as I say. I have few friends, and, if I had, I could not live on charity: either as a governess or a companion I must earn my own bread."

"How old do you say your boy is? Would you not let me take charge, at any rate, of his education? I——"

"You are too kind," and as she raised her blue eyes to his he saw that they were full of tears, "but I am as proud for him as for myself. Believe me, I thank you more than I can say, but my boy must learn to work, young as he is."



"He can be but a child—you are yourself little more," exclaimed Sir Clement, hastily. "Mrs. Roston, you are too young to realise the difficulties on which you are embarking. Young and lovely as you are, the life of a governess or a companion would be impossible to you, if indeed——" and he paused.

"If anyone would engage me, you mean," she said, with a sad smile. "I know that, to those who are poor and friendless, beauty is a fatal gift; but I cannot renounce my independence, though I shall never forget the kindness which prompted your offer."

Sir Clement never liked opposition, and it seemed to him that for this beautiful, fragile-looking creature to talk of working for her own support was little short of madness; so he began again :

"My dear Mrs. Roston, you must forgive me, but really what you propose is sheer nonsense. Fancy you, who I can see are not devotedly fond of children, shut up in a dismal school-room with a lot of troublesome brats, or as companion to some grumpy old woman, who

would expect you to wash her poodle, and go out in the brougham with both the windows up! It is not to be thought of—you cannot mean it seriously.”

“My dear Sir Clement,” she said, laying her hand on his arm, “you are very kind and very generous, and I am sure you would willingly do everything that is amiable for me if I would only allow it, but indeed it is impossible. Think how short our acquaintance really is—though, owing to circumstances, we have perhaps been more thrown together than if we had known each other for years—and I am sure you will see that I have no course before me but to answer you as I have done. If I did not, I should show that those who are my enemies on board, and grudge me the pleasure of your pleasant society and companionship, are right when they say that it was for my own ends that I did the little I was able to do for you at the commencement of the voyage.”

“Who dares to say such a thing?” exclaimed Sir Clement, angrily—“some one who cannot appreciate your angelic charity and goodness,



or who is jealous of your grace and beauty.”

“Do not ask me who it was. I have few friends on board—few, indeed, in the world.”

“Give me the right to be your best friend, to shield and protect you always,” said Sir Clement, in a very low voice, bending over her.

She looked up with her sweetest smile.

“Indeed I should value your friendship very greatly. As I said before, I have few friends, and you have been most kind to me.”

Sir Clement turned away, and took two or three turns up and down the deck; then he came back to her side, and said, in a low and somewhat hasty voice,

“Mrs. Roston, I do not think you understand me. I want to offer you something more than mere friendship. Will you accept my love—will you be my wife?”

There was no immediate answer; she hid her face in her hands, and there was a long pause. Then in a trembling voice she said,

“Sir Clement, I said before you were kind and generous, but I hardly can find words now to say what I think of you. To shield me, a

woman you hardly know, from sorrow and discomfort, you would give me your name and alter your whole life. Nothing I can say will ever describe to you what I feel at your conduct, but, believe me, I can be generous too—I will not take advantage of your noble offer.”

“You are altogether mistaken,” said Sir Clement, eagerly. “It was the shock of hearing of your friendless state, and your wild ideas of self-support, that enlightened me as to my own feelings, but you must not give me credit for any generosity in making the offer. I love you passionately, and it lies with you to make me the happiest of men.”

Again Mrs. Roston covered her face with her hands, and murmured, as if to herself,

“Is it—can it be possible?”

“It can be—it is, dearest Cecilia,” cried Sir Clement, gently possessing himself of one of her hands. “Look at me, and say that you will be mine.”

“Are you really sure?” she said, giving him one look, and then casting down her eyes. “Quite certain that you are not deceiving your-



self—that it is really love you feel for me, and not pity? Think how terrible it would be if you found out your mistake too late.”

Nothing was better calculated to inflame Sir Clement’s passion than this semblance of opposition.

“I am no boy, Cecilia,” he said, hotly, “that you should accuse me of not knowing my own mind. If you knew me better you would be aware that from what I have once said I never change. Put away from you any thought that it is anything but my love that speaks, and tell me that you will be mine, and will make me the happiest of men.”

There was no articulate answer, but her hand stole into his, and he gave it a fervent pressure that was almost pain.

“My darling!” he whispered, “you shall never repent this.”

The scene had not been unobserved.

“She has won the game,” said Mrs. McDougal to Mrs. Dawson.

“You don’t mean——”

“I mean that Mrs. Roston will be Lady

Wychwood. Well, I wish him joy of her. She has played her cards well. What fools men are, to be sure!"

"Well, she is a pretty young thing."

"I tell you she isn't young! Nine and thirty if she's a day. I should like to know what she has made him believe, and how he likes the thought of a ready-made family."

"Oh! has she children?"

"Why, her boy must be seventeen or eighteen!"

"Bless me, you don't say so! And she doesn't look so very much more herself."

Sir Clement was in the seventh heaven of delight. He had quite forgotten his indignation when his sister had suggested the possibility of his marrying again, and spent the day in drawing pictures of the happy life he and his wife should lead at Wychwood. He talked a good deal of Mignonette, and Mrs. Roston seemed never tired of hearing of her, and asked innumerable questions, averring her conviction that she should love the child devotedly. They had so much to talk of that interested Sir Clement

that it never struck him how little he knew of his future wife's past life, and how very chary she appeared of referring to it. He had pressed for an immediate marriage, and she had put her handkerchief to her eyes and murmured something about its being much too soon, and a disrespect to her husband's memory ; but he had persisted with much impetuosity, and she had yielded after a considerable show of reluctance, and had promised to marry him as soon as they reached England. She had no one to whom to announce her intention, she said, sadly, not a relative in the world, and not a friend in London. She must go to an hotel, or to lodgings, when she arrived there. Then was he not right, Sir Clement had triumphantly observed, in saying that she must marry him at once ? The moment he reached London he would take all the necessary steps. If his sister were in town she would receive Mrs. Roston with delight ; if not, there should be no delay.

"It shall be as you please," said Mrs. Roston, sweetly. "It always seems to me there is quite a needless and cruel delay before a marriage

takes place. What with the trousseau, and the settlements, and all the rest of the paraphernalia, it really seems sometimes as if it would never come to pass."

If Sir Clement had been looking at her at the moment, he might have noticed that she looked somewhat anxiously at him as she mentioned the word settlements, but he did not observe it, and replied,

"Well, if you are amiable enough to waive the trousseau, I will engage that the settlements shall not take long. It is generally the parents on both sides who make difficulties, and we have neither of us anyone to consult."

"Settlements!" exclaimed Mrs. Roston. "My dear Sir Clement, you must not think of such a thing! I absolutely forbid it! I, who am a pauper, and have nothing whatever to bring you, can hardly submit to be beholden to your generosity, great as it is."

"Nevertheless, my love," said Sir Clement, "nothing will prevent my making full and accurate provision for my wife. I am not one of those who ever leave anything to chance, and

life, as we all know, is very uncertain. How do I know that I should ever have seen England again but for your wonderful nursing? I feel I owe you my life, Cecilia; you must let me pay my debt."

"You have given me yourself. I want no more," she murmured; but she said no more about the settlements, and Sir Clement drew up instructions, to forward to his lawyer as soon as he set foot in England.

"Where is your little boy?" he asked, one day, when their voyage was nearly at an end. He imagined he knew that the boy was between seven and eight years old, and presumed that he was at school. "Of course you wish him telegraphed to as soon as we arrive?"

"How kind and thoughtful you are for me!" she said, with an upward glance of her beautiful eyes. "You must not spoil me, Clement; I have not been used to such consideration. But no, I will not telegraph to my little Wilfred. He is in Cumberland, and there is no one to come with him. After we—are married," with a smile and a blush, "and after you have

taken me to Paris—as you so kindly promised to do—he can come to us, poor boy!”

“He shall be as happy as we can make him. He is too young for a playfellow for Mignonette, but there is plenty for a boy to enjoy at Wychwood. How wise you are not to disturb him now, when you could only see him for a few days! But, if it would be a pleasure to you, I would go up and fetch him myself.”

“No, no; not for worlds! Let it be as I say,” and Sir Clement, nothing loth, consented.

That afternoon the *Benares* reached Southampton, and Sir Clement telegraphed to his sister to expect him, and to his lawyer to meet him at her house, and then escorted Mrs. Roston to London.

CHAPTER VII.

A hundred thousand welcomes : I could weep,
And I could laugh ; I am light and heavy—welcome.

Coriolanus. Act 2, Scene 1.

'Tis sweet to hear the watch-dog's honest bark
Bay deep-mouth'd welcome as we draw near home :
'Tis sweet to know there is an eye will mark
Our coming, and look brighter when we come.

Don Juan. Canto 1, St. 123.

DURING Sir Clement's absence matters had been passing very tranquilly at the Manor House. At first it had been a terrible deprivation to Mignonette not to be allowed to wander about alone as she had been wont to do, but, when inclined to grumble and think it a great hardship, she checked herself by recollecting that it was her father's wish, and that, after all,



it was very little to do to please him. Then Miss Ashstead was a very different person from the various French ladies to whom the girl had hitherto been entrusted ; who shuddered at the dullness of the life and the dismalness of the house, and would have died rather than take long walks in the woods. Miss Ashstead, on the contrary, was very fond of the country, and had lived in it the greater part of her life ; and Mignonette was amazed to find that she was not, as she feared would have been the case, condemned to dull walks up and down the avenue, or on the gravel-paths of the garden, but that her instructress was as fond of the woods as she was, and quite eager to explore new paths and to see any fresh view. Another pleasant surprise was to find that she was as fond of flowers, and of birds and insects, as was her pupil, with the additional advantage that she not only loved them, as Mignonette did, because they were pretty, but was acquainted with their natures, properties, and habits, and was able to impart information of which her pupil never tired.



Miss Ashstead was aware of the often forgotten fact that education depends less on the information acquired in the school-room—important as that may be—than upon the power of the instructress to awaken and interest the mind and the intelligence of the pupil. It was a novelty to Mignonette to find anyone interested in her pursuits. Hitherto, excepting when Edgar had been at home, and had joined her in the woods, she had been utterly without companionship. Lessons over, her governesses had considered themselves absolved from further interest in her, and had preferred perusing French novels with their feet on the fender—for the *tristesse* of the manor had caused them to require a fire nearly throughout the year—to taking any cognisance of their pupil's pleasures or occupation.

Mignonette's astonishment was indeed great when Miss Ashstead proposed a visit to the old pony in the stable, and suggested that, antiquated as the pony-carriage was, it yet seemed fairly comfortable, and that it would be amusing to make some expeditions in it, even



though the dignified pace at which alone Tommy consented to move would prevent their going very far. The days were getting short and wintry, so they sometimes went out in the morning, utilising the only fine portion of the day, and postponed the lessons till the afternoon; and this change from monotonous routine seemed to Mignonette to give everything the aspect of being amusement and pleasure, instead of school-room worry. Now that she could ask questions as they occurred to her, and receive enlightening answers, instead of being told to learn her lessons, and not waste her time in talking, she learnt to love her work, and was ready and willing to do more than Miss Ashstead considered necessary for her. Altogether, it was a totally novel state of things, and Mignonette soon began to forget the curtailment of her liberty, and to think that she had never before enjoyed herself so much.

Mr. Tippet had condescended to take a great fancy to Miss Ashstead, which was a relief after the state of open hostility in which he had lived

with her predecessor, and she liked dogs, and was very kind to him.

Mignonette was glad to find that she was often allowed to go to see Miss Barford, and that her governess seemed to enjoy the visits. But what pleased and astonished her beyond everything was that, when a hard frost began in the middle of November, Miss Ashstead proved herself able to teach her to skate! The winters in Limeshire were apt to be very cold, and the lake was frequently covered with a sheet of firm, clear ice, on which it had always been the girl's one great desire to disport herself as she had seen the young Barfords do; but Dr. Barford had always put his veto on his children's attempting to instruct her, declaring that, if they ever offered to do so, he would never again allow them to go and skate on the lake at Wychwood. He had a dread of youthful recklessness and contempt of precautions, and felt a prevision that, if he did not at once and decidedly forbid skating, there would be some terrible accident, and Sir Clement would



lay the loss of his only child to his door. So, though Mignonette had always been imploring Edgar to take her on the ice, he had always refused, and it was with ecstasies of delight that she found Miss Ashstead was both willing and able to teach her. Of course the governess took every precaution, had the ice thoroughly tested and examined by Mr. McDonald, and always saw that there were ropes at hand, and that one of the gardeners was within call, and then, having done all she considered necessary, abandoned herself with her pupil to the pleasure of the exercise. The frost was a prolonged one, and, by the time that Edgar and Clare came home for Christmas, Mignonette had become quite expert, and could enjoy herself with them.

Miss Ashstead had been told by Sir Clement the story of Edwin Barford's delinquencies, and warned that she was not to allow Mignonette to forget his injunctions; but she was not troubled by his presence. Very soon after his return to Oxford, Edwin had been rusticated for some misdemeanour of a grave character,

and, to his father's infinite annoyance, had declared that nothing should induce him to return to the University, or to study for the Bar, that the Army was the only life for which he cared, and that, if his father would not consent to his being a soldier, he should just go away and enlist. Dr. Barford hesitated, but Edwin was his favourite child, although he was the one who never even tried to give him satisfaction; and at length his importunities were successful, and a commission was purchased for him—it was just before purchase was abolished: so, instead of coming to Wychwood at Christmas, he was busy learning his drill at Colchester. Mignonette was very glad; she had quite dreaded the awkwardness of meeting and yet of not being able to speak to him, and, well knowing his love of doing whatever was annoying, she felt sure he would have persisted in talking to her on purpose to make her uncomfortable.

Clare continued to treat Mignonette as a little child, but she condescended to like Miss Ashstead, and, when the latter suggested her

assisting in teaching her pupil to dance, consented with an air of magnificent condescension which nothing but the delight which she derived from the exercise would have enabled the girl to forget. Altogether the winter was the happiest which Mignonette had ever spent, and in the spring she had quite settled in her own mind that Sir Clement would return, and then he had said he would come and live at home, and all would be delightful.

But the spring came, and the summer and autumn, and still Sir Clement did not speak of his return. He was a very bad correspondent, wrote seldom and irregularly, and his sister and child were very often a considerable time without knowing where he was. If it had not been for this, they must have been alarmed at the very long silence caused by his illness, for he was incapable of writing himself, and it never occurred to him to desire anyone else to do so. A friend who saw him in Calcutta wrote to Mrs. Davenant to say he had been very ill, and was going home as soon as he was able to move; but she thought it best



to say nothing of his indisposition to Mignonette, so the child pined for tidings, and almost wondered whether her father had forgotten her—it seemed so strange he should not write sometimes. Her mind had developed very fast under Miss Ashstead's training; indeed that lady, who thought her pupil somewhat delicate and fragile, in spite of Sir Caulfield Carluke's dictum that there was nothing the matter with her, was anxious rather to curb her love for study, and to keep her in the air as much as possible, and also to interest her in accomplishments. It did not appear as if the girl would ever very greatly excel in music. She practised conscientiously, as she did everything which she undertook; but it was evidently rather a duty than a pleasure, and she always seemed relieved when the appointed task was done, and she could return to her books. She played fairly well for her age, but, if ever she were to care much for music, it would be for singing; she promised to have a sweet though not very powerful voice, and was fond of singing snatches of old ballads and quaint songs which she had

lighted upon in her wanderings in the library. She cared more for drawing, but her excessively sensitive eye for colour was almost a drawback, for by no possibility could she ever satisfy herself that the colour she washed in could be the right one—it fell so far short of the lovely tints of Nature.

The first summer after Sir Clement's departure Mignonette and her governess had spent six weeks at Littlehampton during Mrs. Davenant's stay there, and the girl enjoyed the first sight of the sea, while the change of air and the bathing certainly invigorated her. But when, the succeeding year, her aunt wrote suggesting that they should go again, she implored Miss Ashstead to refuse.

"But, my dear, the sea certainly did you good last year, and I thought you quite liked the change."

"Yes, for once, but I would so much rather stay at home. You won't say we *must* go, will you, dear Miss Ashstead?"

"Why do you dislike the idea?"

"Oh, the rooms are so small and stuffy, and

we are never alone ; there are always the girls and Aunt Matilda—and oh ! above all there is Hector.”

“Hector was a trial, I admit ; but are you sure he is not at school ?”

“It is holiday-time, you know. And then suppose papa came home suddenly, and I was not here—only think how dreadful it would be !”

“I should think he would write beforehand.”

“He never does ; he just walks in as if he had only gone away the day before. Oh ! do please let us stay here ; I shall be so unhappy away.”

Miss Ashstead consented with some reluctance ; she thought intercourse with her cousins good for Mignonette, as tending to prevent her from being too grown-up for her age, the natural consequence of her total want of young companions. The girl, though only fifteen, and from her diminutive stature looking even younger, was in mind and thoughts as old as some girls five or six years her seniors, and the governess considered that, though six weeks

spent with Ida and Hector Davenant might not alter her views, or cause her to care more for things more suited to her age than her favourite poetry and essays, it was yet useful as recalling to her how young she really was, and also in accustoming her to bear the little trials and annoyances consequent on companionship with others of her own age, from which she was, of course, completely free at Wychwood. She was also a little sorry on her own account. She had said to Sir Clement, and truly, that she was not afraid of dulness, and she had really learnt to like the life at the Manor House, hermit-like as it was ; but she did not conceal from herself that the change the previous year had been very beneficial to her, and that she had been glad to see that there were other people in the world than the villagers of Wychwood. She had returned to the manor mentally and bodily refreshed, and she felt sorry to lose the opportunity of a change again this year. But Mignonette's manner was so imploring, and her deep-grey eyes looked so piteous filled with tears at the thought of the possibility

of her father returning home and finding her absent, that she felt she could not insist, as they were both perfectly well, and there existed no positive necessity for a change.

"How good you are to me!" said Mignonette, with a sigh of relief. "I was so afraid you would think we *ought* to go, and then I know nothing would have made you refuse."

"I am not at all sure now, Mignonette, that we ought not to have gone. I am afraid Mrs. Davenant will be vexed."

"Aunt Matilda!—oh, she will never think about it again after just the first; and only think how very dreadful it would be to be away if papa came! He seldom stays more than two days, and they would be over before we could know and get back."

Mignonette did not say much respecting her anxiety at the long time that had elapsed since she last heard of her father, but Miss Ashstead could see that she was getting very uneasy. She noticed that the girl looked anxiously for the notices of arrival of the Peninsular and Oriental steamers, and was always unsettled

for two or three days after, starting at every sound, and never willingly going far from the house. She began to feel very indignant with Sir Clement: it was really cruel to leave his family so long without any tidings of him, and, of course, Mrs. Davenant knew no more than Mignonette did, or she would naturally have communicated the intelligence. The idea of his being ill occurred to her occasionally, but she did not care to suggest it to her pupil, who, as she saw, was already quite sufficiently anxious; besides, she said to herself that, even if he were ill, he could easily have got some one to write for him. In fact, Sir Clement had abstained from doing so in order not to alarm his sister or daughter; he felt not the least uneasiness himself when he did not hear from them, comforting himself with the universal masculine argument as to no news being good news, and never thinking that they were very unlikely indeed to see things in the same light. If he had guessed how Mignonette was beginning to fret over his prolonged silence, to imagine all sorts of terrible calamities, and to grow

thin and pale, he would have bitterly reproached himself for his want of consideration.

It was a fine hot evening in August. Miss Ashstead was seated under a splendid cedar that formed the centre of the formal garden of the manor, and to which all the clipped yew-hedges and avenues of standard roses converged. She was leaning back in a low chair, half reading, half dreaming, with Tippet, somewhat overcome with the heat, extended at her feet, while Mignonette, with a basket on her arm, was wandering to and fro, snipping off faded flowers and crooning tender ballads to herself. The girl made a pretty picture, as she sauntered about among the flowers in her white dress with its pale-green ribbons. She had not grown very much since we first made her acquaintance on the birch-tree overhanging the river, and it was evident that she would always be both small and slight; but her figure no longer gave the impression of her being a child, and, if it had done so, the thoughtfulness of her face would at once have contradicted it. Restraint from wandering bare-headed in the sun



had restored the normal fairness of her skin, and, though there were still a few unsightly freckles on the broad, white brow, she was by no means so disfigured as had formerly been the case. Her ragged frock and battered hat had disappeared, and she was a very daintily-attired damsel, with hair as neat as its inveterately curly nature would permit, and she attended most scrupulously to her promise to Edgar never to go out without gloves.

Sometimes when she saw the improvement in her own appearance—to which, though not vain, she was by no means insensible—she wished that her playfellow could see how she had remembered his injunction; but Edgar was rarely, if ever, at the rectory, and his last visit there had been paid when she was away at Littlehamptom. Edgar had spent his vacations abroad for the sake of acquiring foreign languages; he had taken his degree, and had been appointed as an unpaid attaché to Madrid, so there was little chance of seeing him at present. Edwin too rarely, if ever, came home; he preferred spending his leave in London, or in



paying visits to his friends, saying that Limeshire was very dull, and that there was nothing to be done there. Poor Miss Barford missed "her boys" terribly, more perhaps Edwin who would not come than Edgar who could not, for to the absence of the latter she had of course resigned herself when he received his appointment. She talked freely to Mignonette and Miss Ashstead of her elder nephew, and read extracts from his letters, but of Edwin she never spoke, partly from mortification at his neglect, and partly from the feeling that, after Sir Clement's prohibition of intercourse, it was wrong to speak of him to the child.

Suddenly Mignonette's low song ceased, and she stood as if listening attentively. Tippet too roused himself, pricked his ears, and gave a short bark.

"What is it?" asked Miss Ashstead, who heard nothing.

"Hush!" said Mignonette, holding up her hand, and, after another minute's silence, she exclaimed, "It is wheels, and they are coming up the avenue. It must be papa! Only think if



we had been at Littlehampton!" and flew into the house, followed by Tippet barking vociferously.

It proved to be Sir Clement, and, as his daughter flew into his arms, he could not help being struck with the improvement in her appearance. It was indeed a change from the sun-burnt, unkempt little girl he had left behind to this dainty maiden. Thanks to her small stature, Mignonette had escaped the terrible gawkinsness which generally causes girls of her age to give an impression to beholders of nothing but arms and legs: the which members are a sore grief and annoyance to their possessors, and always most painfully in their way. A tall girl of fourteen or fifteen is perhaps one of the most uncomfortable creatures on the face of the earth!

"Oh, papa, papa, I am so happy! It is so long since you wrote, I began to think something dreadful had happened," and Mignonette danced round and round him, and then suddenly burst into tears.



Sir Clement foresaw hysterics, and was at once alarmed.

"Mignonette, my dear child, do pray control yourself! What is the matter? You see, I am here safe and well. Where is Miss Ashstead? Had you not better go to her till you are better? Do compose yourself."

The suggestion that she should leave him and go to Miss Ashstead had more effect on Mignonette than anything else. If he could suggest her leaving him when he had only that moment returned, he must be very seriously displeased. So with a tremendous effort, which made her tremble in every limb, she forced back her tears, and said, in a low voice,

"I am only so glad, papa, and so relieved."

"You should never let emotion get the better of you, my dear," said her father, much comforted that his apprehension of hysterics had not been verified. "Gentleness and composure are most valuable attributes in a woman. Perhaps I have been a little remiss in writing, but you must always remember that no news is



good news, and never be uneasy about not hearing from anyone. It is quite time enough to be anxious when you know that something is the matter."

"And have you been quite well, and enjoying yourself, papa?" asked Mignonette, who could not agree with this view, but did not attempt to combat it. "It is almost two years since you went away."

"So it is, all but two months. You have altered and improved very much, Mignonette, though I cannot say you are much grown. You certainly mean to follow in the steps of most of your ancestresses in the picture-gallery."

"I have grown, though," said Mignonette, drawing herself up.

"Not much," said her father, laughing. "Never mind, my dear, I am quite satisfied, as far as I can see. And now I want some food. Are you not curious to know what has kept me away so long?"

"Yes, indeed, but I hope it has been something pleasant."



"Well, not exactly; I had a bad fever at Agra, and then a relapse at Calcutta, or I should have been home months ago."

"Oh! papa, and we never knew!"

"My dear, what good would it have done if you had? You could have done nothing for me, and would only have been frightened, and miserable, and anxious; it was much better as it was."

By this time they were seated in the breakfast-room, at the supper which Mrs. Jenkins had hastily arranged for her master. Mignonette flitted about filling his glass, watching to see what she could bring him, looking all the time, as she felt, most supremely happy.

In thinking over his return home it had always seemed to Sir Clement that his first words, after greeting his daughter, would be the announcement of his approaching marriage; but, now that he was face to face with Mignonette, he found it unaccountably difficult to frame his speech. Why was it? He was happy, delighted, sure that he had done the best thing for his own happiness and that of his child, and



passioned tone startled him. Hastily he took up the lamp, and, without another glance at the portrait, left the room, and betook himself to his own chamber.



CHAPTER VIII.

This is her picture as she was :
 It seems a thing to wonder on,
 As though mine image in the glass
 Should tarry when myself am gone.
 I gaze until she seems to stir,—
 Until mine eyes almost aver
 That now, even now, the sweet lips part
 To breathe the words of the sweet heart :
 And yet the earth is over her.

The Portrait—DANTE.—G. ROSSETTI.

SIR CLEMENT was surprised and somewhat disturbed to find that even the next morning it did not seem easy to tell his little girl what he wanted to say to her. As Mignonette sat opposite to him, chattering away gaily in her delight at having him at home again, he

seemed to catch once more that curious, intangible likeness to her mother which had so surprised him when he noticed it for the first time after her accident, and his uneasy feelings of the night before began to return. Really this was too ridiculous! and, breakfast being over, he called his daughter to him.

"Mignonette, I have something to tell you that will, I hope, give you pleasure. I—" and then he paused. It was strange how difficult he found it to make his announcement.

"Yes, papa," said Mignonette, looking up all expectation.

"My dear, I am sure you will like to hear that I am coming home to live."

"Oh, papa! for always? How delightful! Now I shall really have you all to myself!"

"Not quite, my love, though of course we shall see a great deal of each other; but—a lady is coming to live here with me."

"A lady!" said Mignonette, wonderingly. "Is it Aunt Matilda?" then, with a look of dismay, "Oh, papa! will Hector come too?"

"It is not Aunt Matilda," said Sir Clement,



feeling that his task did not grow easier; "it is—Mignonette, my dear, I am going to be married."

Mignonette said nothing; the idea was so strange and wonderful to her that she could not speak. Unconsciously, the child had always had a sort of worship for her beautiful mother, and would often spend a long time gazing at her portrait as if she could never tire. Then her pity for her father's loss had always been so great that she was fairly stunned at the thought of his marrying again; such a possibility had never suggested itself to her mind.

Her father waited for her to speak, and at length said, somewhat impatiently,

"Well, my dear, have you nothing to say to me? I thought you would be so pleased."

"I am very glad you are to be at home," said Mignonette, slowly; "but about the other—it is so strange, so sudden, I hardly feel as if I understood."

"It may be strange, Mignonette, but it will be very delightful. She is very lovely, very charming; she will make us both as happy as



the day is long. You will be glad to have some one to love, Mignonette."

"I love you, papa, and Miss Ashstead, and Miss Barford."

"That is not the same as one who will be with you always, who will be your mother."

"Oh, papa," cried Mignonette, in a pained voice, "she will not be mamma!"

Sir Clement both felt and looked annoyed.

"You must certainly call her so," he said; "I shall be very much surprised and displeased, Mignonette, if you do not love your new mamma very much," and, so saying, he left the room and walked off in the direction of the agent's house.

He reproached himself almost immediately for having spoken harshly to the child—doubtless it was natural that she should be surprised and startled, but it gave him an uncomfortable feeling. He had pictured to himself that she would be so delighted, so charmed with the idea of some one to love, and she had certainly not fulfilled his expectations, but had seemed shocked and distressed. Ah! but it would be



different when she had seen Cecilia ; she was too old now to take unreasoning prejudices, as a child might have done, against the very idea of a step-mother, and Miss Ashstead was an eminently sensible person, who would point out what a great advantage it would be to her. And besides, no one could possibly resist Cecilia's fascination. But, all the time that he thus comforted himself, Sir Clement was sensible of a feeling of considerable disappointment that his announcement had not been as rapturously received as he had anticipated.

Miss Ashstead saw him set off from the house alone, and, after waiting some time for Mignonette's appearance, she went in search of her. But the girl was neither in her own room nor in the library ; where could she be ? Suddenly, as she was passing the drawing-room door, Miss Ashstead thought she heard a sob, and, looking in, she saw her pupil seated before the table beneath her mother's picture, her head resting on her folded arms, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

"My dear child," she exclaimed, advancing



and laying a hand on her shoulder, "what is it? What is the matter?"

Mignonette raised her head, and leant it against her.

"Oh!" she said, between long-drawn sobs, "papa is going to be married, and I am to call some one else mamma!"

Miss Ashstead could feel for the girl. She, too, had had a step-mother, who was the true cause of her leaving home and going out to fight the battle of life for herself. Besides, she knew Mignonette's sensitive nature, and the curious worship which she felt for the mother whom she had never seen. She passed her arms round the girl and drew her close to her.

"Dear child, of course at first you are surprised and startled; but you must think of your father. Consider how sad and lonely he has been all these years!"

"Yes; I know," with a great sob. "It is very bad and wicked of me—but, oh, you don't know what I felt when he said, 'She will be your mother!' And then, I am afraid, I made

him angry ; for I could not help saying, 'Oh, papa, she will not be mamma !' and he said, in a voice I never heard him speak in before but once, when he said I must obey him, and never speak to Edwin Barford again, 'You must certainly call her so ; and I shall be very much surprised and displeased if you do not love your new mamma very much,' and then he went out. Oh ! Miss Ashstead, he never, never was angry with me before !"

"And he will not be angry with you now, dear. You must remember that he of course loves this lady very much, and was naturally distressed that you did not seem to like the idea, as he loves you so dearly too. I do not blame you, dear. It was very natural that you should be startled ; but you must think of your father's feelings rather than your own. If he, who adored your mother so much, and has mourned her loss so long and deeply, can bear to think of replacing her, it can hardly be so difficult for you who never saw her, and who only love what you have heard."

"It does not seem so hard when you talk



about it," said Mignonette, whose sobs were becoming less frequent; "but I can't tell you what I felt at first. Do you think I hurt papa very much? I should be so sorry! What can I say to him?"

"My dear, he will be sure to understand that you were startled. You need not say much; only tell him you are glad he is going to do what will be for his happiness, and that you will try to love your new mother very much. Try to accustom yourself to thinking of your mother, dear," as she felt the girl shrink at the word. "Remember it is to be, and must be borne bravely."

"I will try," said Mignonette, dejectedly.

"If you try, you will succeed. Besides, recollect you have no right to assume that there will be anything to bear. Doubtless the future Lady Wychwood is charming, and you will find no difficulty in loving her very dearly."

"You always look on the bright side of everything," said Mignonette, kissing her.

"It is always best to do so, dear. If people



did so oftener, there would be a great deal more happiness in the world. By determinedly looking on the bright side you often fail to see the dark one altogether."

"I wish papa would come in," said Mignonette, wistfully. "I should like to tell him that I am glad—and indeed, Miss Ashstead, I am."

"I am sure you are, dear. Don't say too much, or it may seem as if you had made up your mind to be miserable, and were trying to make the best of it. And now come and try over that duet; you will be better for something to occupy your thoughts. We will tell Judson to let you know as soon as Sir Clement comes in."

Mignonette could not have settled herself to any occupation requiring much thought, as Miss Ashstead well understood. But the duet, which required a certain amount of attention, was the exact thing for her. But Sir Clement tried her sorely; for he remained out the entire day, and it was not till just before dinner that she



had an opportunity of making the little speech she had, poor child, been rehearsing all day.

"Papa, I was so surprised this morning; I am afraid I hurt you. I am very glad you should do anything to make you happy, and I am sure I shall be very fond of anyone whom you love."

Sir Clement bent down, and kissed her fondly.

"Thank you, my little girl, I quite understand. She will love you very dearly, Mignonette, and I do not doubt that you will adore her."

And he was, as he said, quite satisfied; but yet the child's first exclamation, "She will not be mamma!" would sound in his ears, strive as he might to put it from him. No, truly lovely and fascinating as Cecilia was, she could not be Mignon; no one in all the world could ever be that. The love of his youth, the fair flower that he had at length been allowed to pluck only to see it wither. Still he was more than fortunate that such another chance of happiness

should be vouchsafed to him ; it was more than he had ever either hoped or expected.

The next day he walked down to the rectory to tell the news to Dr. Barford, Mignonette accompanying him, always glad of an opportunity of paying a visit to "Aunt Milly."

"May I tell her, papa?" she asked, in a half-whisper, as they reached the rectory gate.

"Tell her? Tell whom? What? Oh! I understand. Yes, you may tell Miss Barford you are going to be a very happy little girl with a mamma to love you."

"I wish," thought Mignonette, as she went into the drawing-room as her father was ushered into the study, "that papa would not talk to me as if I were a child; he forgets I am past fifteen. I suppose it is because I am so small. How I wish I could grow!"

The tidings of Sir Clement's intended marriage were received with heartfelt interest at the rectory. He and Dr. Barford had been friends all their lives, and a hopeless attachment to him had been the romance, of which no one had ever dreamt, of Miss Barford's life. It was love for



him that had kept her single, though more than one had sought to woo her, and it was the same feeling that made her heart yearn so to his motherless child. Her warm congratulations and cheerful pictures of the future consoled and exhilarated Mignonette almost more than Miss Ashstead's wise words, and it struck her particularly when Aunt Milly said,

"You may be sure, my love, she is all that is charming, or your father would never like her."

"So," said the rector to his sister, coming into the drawing-room as soon as Sir Clement was gone, "Wychwood is to have a mistress at last."

"Yes, I am truly glad; it will keep him at home, and it will be the best thing in the world for Mignonette."

"That depends. A step-mother is sometimes a doubtful blessing."

"I think his choosing her tells us she must be nice. Who is she? for the child did not know."

"A Mrs. Roston, a widow, with one little

boy, who nursed him on the voyage from Calcutta. Her husband was a colonel in the Indian army, and died of fever. I don't know why, the name seems familiar to me."

"There was a beautiful Mrs. Roston whom we met about twelve years ago when we were staying with your sister-in-law at Torquay, but it could not be she, I should think. She must be nearly forty now, and her son seventeen or eighteen. She had girls too."

"No, it could not be; but it accounts for my recalling the name. He says she is about seven or eight and twenty."

"Well, I am glad it cannot be that Mrs. Roston, for, if you remember, there were some strange stories about her, and a talk about her being separated from her husband."

"No. You know, Millicent, I never listen to gossip; besides, ill-natured things are sure to be said about a handsome woman who is obliged to leave her husband in India, even though it is for the sake of her children. This may make a great difference to Mignonette."

"You mean if Sir Clement should have a

son? Well, dear child, I do not know that it is a very great advantage to a girl to be a great heiress, and she is not old enough yet to feel the change in her prospects. It will be a great thing for her to have a mother's care at last."

"That depends a good deal on the mother," said the rector, retiring to his study.

Sir Clement's stay was only to last two days, and the topic of his marriage was not again broached between him and his daughter; he did not refer to it, and Mignonette did not know what questions to ask, although she longed to know something of a person with whom she was to be brought into such close contact.

The morning of Sir Clement's departure, she timidly brought him a beautiful bouquet of roses.

"Will you take these to mamma from me, papa?" she said, shyly.

Sir Clement was on the point of saying that they would be very inconvenient to carry, and that there were most lovely roses to be bought in London, but he looked at Mignonette's eager

face, and saw that to refuse her offering would disappoint her very much; so he admired the roses, kissed her, and told her he would be sure to deliver them, and that he was sure Mrs. Roston would be very much pleased at her thinking of them.

“And when,” said Mignonette—“when shall you come back, papa?”

Sir Clement had said nothing respecting the date of his marriage.

“We are to be married on Wednesday,” said her father, it being now Saturday. “I wish you could come up for the wedding, Mignonette; but there is nowhere for you to stay, for your aunt is only coming up for the day from Littlehampton. Then we go to Paris for a fortnight, and then we shall come home. I will give Mrs. Jennings plenty of notice to get the rooms ready. We shall be at home certainly before the end of September. Good-bye; the time will soon pass.”

Mignonette stood at the door watching her father as he drove away, and hoping he would look back and wave a final adieu, but he did

not do so—indeed, his mind was quite full of his adored Cecilia and the bliss before him.

Mignonette went slowly back to the school-room.

“Papa is to be married on Wednesday,” she said.

“Well, dear, are you to be at the wedding?”

“No. Aunt Matilda is away, and there is nowhere for me to stay.” Then, after a long pause, “I should like to have seen her.”

“My dear, you would have seen little or nothing on that day, and I suppose Sir Clement and Lady Wychwood will soon be at home.”

“Yes, before the end of September.”

“Well, then, there is not long to wait. Suppose you try to finish that cushion you have been at work upon so long for her sitting-room.”

Mignonette caught at the idea; something tangible to do in a given time was exactly what she wanted, and she worked at her cush-



ion with such diligence that it was completed fully ten days before Lady Wychwood's arrival.

Mrs. Davenant's surprise, when she received her brother's announcement of his intended marriage, knew no bounds. Much as she wished him to marry, she had quite given up all hope that he would ever do so, and, now that he had chosen for himself, she was not quite sure that she liked it. She would have liked him to marry some girl with whom she was acquainted, whose relations she knew, and whom everyone knew everything about; whereas he had chosen a widow who had dropped from the skies, and of whose antecedents nothing was known—a Mrs. Roston, who had been a Miss Distin. But neither name conveyed anything to her mind; neither was to be found in the "County Families," nor were any of her friends or acquaintances, to all of whom she wrote, able to enlighten her on the subject. Then she had a sort of general idea that all Indian ladies were terrible flirts, and were so accustomed to grass-widowhood that they could



never settle down as steady and respectable wives and mothers. And the idea of a hurried, quiet wedding was abhorrent to her. Clement ought to be married with all proper pomp and circumstance, with a full gathering of all important relatives, both on his side and that of the bride—if, indeed, she had any that were presentable, which the extreme haste of the proceeding induced Mrs. Davenant greatly to doubt. Sir Clement had said not a word respecting his wife's friendlessness or poverty; he knew the world well enough to be aware that the less said on those points the better.

Mrs. Davenant came up to town for the day for an introduction to the bride-elect, and willingly admitted her excessive beauty; but this did not make her at all more comfortable respecting her antecedents. She had tried every means to make Mrs. Roston talk of her friends and relations, but, though perfectly courteous and even sweet in manner, that lady contrived to maintain an impenetrable silence on the very topics on which her interlocutor longed for information.



"I hope it is all right, I am sure," said Mrs. Davenant to a friend when talking over her visit; "it would be too dreadful if poor dear Clement were taken in by an adventuress; but it is very strange. Not one relation does she seem to have. She said something about having had very few originally, and having lost sight of those few during her life in India; but relations don't sink into the earth, and you would have thought that she would have been proud to tell them what a marriage she is going to make."

"Perhaps," suggested the friend, who was a shrewd woman of the world, "Sir Clement may owe her a debt of gratitude for suppressing the relatives, if indeed they exist. Depend upon it, if they were creditable they would have been produced. It is very commendable of her to drop them."

"Yes, if she doesn't produce them afterwards," said Mrs. Davenant, doubtfully. "I always like to know the worst at once."

Mrs. Roston professed to be much touched by Mignonette's present of roses.



"So sweet of the dear child," she said, looking up at Sir Clement; "so good of her to forgive me for taking her own mother's place. I shall love her very dearly. Clement, how I hope she will love me!"

"I don't think there can be much doubt of that, Cecilia. Who could help it?"

"Ah! Clement, you are partial. It is not everyone, dear, who will see with your eyes."

"Well, they must be blind if they don't."

"But, Clement, I wonder if you—if she would mind my calling her Reseda instead of Mignonette?"

"My dear Cecilia, why?"

"It would be pleasanter for me. Of course I know you called her after her poor mother, and——"

"Well, of course, dear, it shall be as you wish, but you must not ask me to change."

"No, no, not for worlds! How good you are to me in everything!"

"Small wonder, when you have made me so



happy. Will you come with me on Monday to Ruby and Glitter's to see the diamonds?"

"Let us wait till we pass through on our way back from Paris," said Mrs. Roston, who had manifested the strongest objection to going out ever since her arrival in London, and, when fairly obliged to do so, had enveloped herself in the thickest of veils.

"I wonder how many women would quietly postpone a sight of their diamonds?" said Sir Clement, smiling. "Not many, I fancy. However, it shall be as you please."

The next morning, when Sir Clement arrived according to appointment to take Mrs. Roston to church, he found her suffering from a headache which rendered such a proceeding impossible, and which did not abate till quite too late for afternoon service. Happy as he was in her company, Sir Clement rather chafed at being all day in the house. He was a very restless man, and fond of an open-air life.

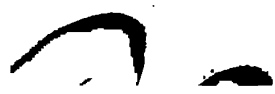
"You don't always stay at home all

day long, do you, Cecilia?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Oh! no," replied Mrs. Roston, laughing. "On the contrary, I am very fond of air and exercise; but I should like to be quite quiet, if you don't mind, until we are married. Then you will find me as active as you can wish."

Sir Clement thought it strange; however, there were only two days to be passed, and he had a multiplicity of things to do, so the hardship was not, after all, very great. He sent Mignonette a very beautiful locket, containing a photograph of Mrs. Roston, also a large cabinet photograph, in a handsome *rococo* frame—"that she might realize how lovely her mother was;" and at the same time mentioned Lady Wychwood's wish to call her Reseda, and that he had agreed to it, though he should not adopt it himself.

Mignonette thought the face very beautiful—about that there could hardly be two opinions; but she took the photograph into the



drawing-room, and, looking at it under her mother's portrait, wondered how her father could admire one face, having known and loved the other. The idea of being called Reseda, even though it was only by one person, distressed her greatly. Of course, she said to herself and to Miss Ashstead, it did not really signify, and the name meant precisely the same thing, but there was the important difference that it contained no sound of connection with her mother's name. Well, she was glad her father would still call her Mignonette, and so, she was sure, would Aunt Milly.

Mrs. Davenant was to be in London early on the day of the wedding to accompany the bride to church, as Mrs. Roston had no friends of her own.

"None, at least, in London," she said, quietly; "and none whom she cared to give the trouble of travelling many miles to her wedding."

Very strange, Mrs. Davenant thought, feeling more and more uncomfortable respecting the



whole affair, yet still she consented to oblige her brother, and officiate as his bride's friend. Colonel Wychwood, Sir Clement's uncle, was to give her away. There was to be no attempt at a breakfast, and the bride and bridegroom were to drive from the church straight to Charing Cross, *en route* to Dover. Mrs. Davenant was much struck and puzzled by her companion's extreme nervousness in the carriage; she sat as far back as possible, as if to shun observation, and, as they got out at the church door, it was evident that she was trembling violently.

"Not often that a widow is so nervous," mused Mrs. Davenant, as she followed Colonel Wychwood and the bride up the aisle. "I am sure there is some mystery! Heaven grant it is nothing disgraceful! I really believe if it were it would kill Clement!"

The ceremony was soon over. Sir Clement and Lady Wychwood had signed the register, and received the congratulations and adieux of their two companions. Just as they emerged from the church door a gentleman who was



passing turned his head accidentally, caught sight of Lady Wychwood, and, starting forward, exclaimed,

“Good heavens! Cecilia, what does this mean?”

Sir Clement felt his wife start, and saw that she turned very pale, but she quickly recovered herself, gave the stranger a slight bow, and saying,

“I beg your pardon—a mistake, I think,” passed on to the carriage.

Sir Clement followed her, and they drove rapidly away.

Mrs. Davenant and Colonel Wychwood were close behind, and the stranger turned to them.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, courteously; “but will you tell me—was not that Mrs. Roston?”

“It was,” replied Colonel Wychwood; “she has just married my nephew, Sir Clement Wychwood.”

“Married!”



"Are you a relation?" asked Mrs. Davenant, burning with curiosity.

"No," and the stranger turned away, "I am only a man whom she has deceived."



CHAPTER IX.

O that men's ears should be
To counsel deaf, but not to flattery !
Timon of Athens. Act 1, Scene 2.

Persuasion hung upon thy lip,
And sly insinuation's softer arts
In ambush lay about thy flowing tongue.
The Grave—BLAIR.

“MY love, you look startled,” said Sir
Clement, putting his arm round his
bride, as they drove away.

“Yes, it is very silly of me ; but I don't know
—somehow it seemed like a bad omen.”

“Bad omen ! Nonsense, my dear. You must
not be superstitious ; but it certainly was
strange. You see, he knew your name.”

"Cecilia is not an uncommon one."

"Perhaps not; but it is odd his fitting it to the right person."

"A likeness, I suppose. Did you see what he was like?"

"No, I can't say I did; I was thinking of you—you looked as if you were going to faint. As for a likeness, he must be a lucky man if he has ever seen your equal; it is more than I have ever done."

"You flatter me, dear," said Lady Wychwood, but she had looked infinitely relieved ever since Sir Clement had said that he had not seen the person who had spoken to them. "If you say such sweet things, I shall begin to give myself airs, and fancy I am a great beauty."

"You can hardly help knowing that you are one," said Sir Clement, laughing; "I never believe in lovely women who 'haven't an idea that they are good-looking.' They are either humbugs, or else their beauty only exists in the imagination of their friends. It would be unworthy of you to pretend that you are unaware of your own beauty."



Sir Clement and Lady Wychwood had been more than a week in Paris, and were enjoying themselves excessively. It was his pleasure that she should array herself in all that was most tasteful and costly, and certainly her appearance in it amply repaid him. There was not a cloud in the sky, and Sir Clement's admiration and devotion grew daily more and more excessive. Lady Wychwood was all that was charming and amiable, showing a devotion and an anxiety to please him which delighted him more and more, and caused him daily to wonder and rejoice at his own good fortune.

Had he been observant, he might have noticed that Lady Wychwood was always rather nervous about the time that the post came, and that she looked very anxiously at him while he perused his correspondence. But he noticed nothing, only observed that no letter ever came for her, and thought pitifully how lonely would have been her life if he had not met her. Something of this he said to her one day as they were driving in the Bois de Boulogne.

"Don't talk of it," she said, with a shudder, and then suddenly, laying her hand on his arm, she continued, hurriedly, "Remember, Clement, whatever may happen, whatever people may tell you or try to make you believe of me, remember that I loved you from the first moment I saw you—loved you with an intensity that made me forget all. Promise me."

"My love," said Sir Clement, soothingly, "why should you excite yourself? No one is likely, I should hope, to try to make mischief between us; and, if they did, what could there be in your young life for them to say against you? You are nervous to-day, dear; but it is very sweet to me to hear that I so early won your love. Then why, dearest, did you hesitate as to accepting me?"

"Oh, Clement! I thought of your family—that they would say you had been taken in by a designing widow, who wanted you for your wealth and position and—and all that sort of thing."

"Well, Cecilia, I will promise, 'whatever happens,' to use your own phrase—though no-

thing is going to happen—to remember that you loved me from the first.”

“Before I even knew who you were.”

“No? is that so? I am glad to hear it, dear, though I never once thought of you as being mercenary. Please God we shall spend very many happy years together. I long for you to see Wychwood. I hope you will be fond of it.”

“I know I shall, from what you say of it; and you know I adore the country. The beautiful freshness and green of England is such a relief after the fearful dust and heat of India.”

“Cecilia, does your boy never write to you? I don’t believe you have had one letter since we married.”

“Boys are never good at writing,” said his wife, colouring, and looking slightly confused. “Don’t you think it is almost time to go home now? You know we are going to the theatre to-night.”

The theatre was very hot, and Lady Wychwood came home with a headache, which had

not departed the next morning; so that, for the first time since their marriage, Sir Clement breakfasted alone. After the meal was over, he took up his letters, which were principally forwarded from home. For the first time there was one for Lady Wychwood, and when he took it to her he could not help being struck with the strange manner with which she received it. If the thing were not impossible, he would have said there was a look of positive fear on her face.

Psha! how fanciful he must be! It must be that melodramatic piece they saw last night; and Sir Clement returned to the perusal of his own correspondence.

A good many very uninteresting epistles had been disposed of when he opened one which, from its first line, arrested his attention.

“SIR CLEMENT WYCHWOOD,

“What are your intentions respecting the son of Mrs. Roston? He is now past eighteen, and should have better education than



she has ever afforded him. As I think it very likely that you have never heard the truth respecting him, I will tell you the state of the case. Twelve years, or rather more, ago, Mrs. Roston brought her three children, a boy and two girls, to England. There were, at that time, reports afloat very derogatory to her character, and it was even supposed that Colonel Roston would sue for a divorce. However, Mrs. Roston quickly returned to India, and her influence over him was so great that he was soon as much her slave as ever. The gentleman whose name was coupled with hers was a Captain Lauriston, and he returned to India shortly after she did, and remained there till three years ago. The boy was sent to a school at Brighton, but, after a year or two, Mrs. Roston wrote that such expense could no longer be afforded, and that a cheaper one must be found.

“At last one was discovered in Cumberland, one really only suited to the sons of farmers, and here the boy was sent, and still



remains. I have only lately learnt that Colonel Roston died in the belief that his son was at Eton. He was an indolent man, and allowed his wife to draw all his cheques, and manage all his business, and she must have appropriated the money which he believed was devoted to this purpose. The boy is a fine-looking lad, very backward of course, and has hardly been trained as a gentleman; but he appears to have good impulses, and something might yet be made of him.

"I am the curate of the parish in which the school is situated, and know a little of the boy. The family circumstances I know from a cousin of Colonel Roston's, who was accidentally in this neighbourhood a few months ago. The two girls, ages about sixteen and fourteen, were taken compassion upon by a sister of their father's, and placed at a school in London; but this lady died two years ago, and I am not aware what has become of them.

"I trust you will pardon the liberty I have



taken in writing to you, a perfect stranger, about matters which you might well tell me are no concern of mine. But I take a great interest in Wilfred Roston, and from what I have heard of his mother I think it more than probable that from her you will never hear the true state of the case. I can refer you to the cousin of whom I spoke for the absolute accuracy of my statements—William Roston, Esq., 17, Virginia Street, Belgravia. He was very kind to Mrs. Roston during her short visit to England, and she kept up a correspondence with him for some time. My surprise at seeing the announcement of her marriage was great, as Mr. Roston certainly gave me to understand that she was engaged to Captain Lauriston, and remarked that, if she married him so soon after her husband's death (Colonel Roston died at Christmas), it would give a colour to all the reports which had formerly been current.

"I must again express a hope that you will not think me very presumptuous and meddlesome,



and will credit me with the good intentions which have alone caused me to write as I have done.

“I have the honour to be, sir,

“Your obedient servant,

“HENRY CORBYN,

“Curate in Charge.

“Utterthwaite,

“Cumberland.”

Sir Clement lay back in his chair, so prostrated by the blow that for a time he could not even think. His brain seemed perfectly seething with bewilderment. Was it possible? Cecilia—his beautiful, gentle, loving Cecilia—ill-spoken of, accused of misappropriating money intended for the advantage of her own son! Incredible! And the boy's age—past eighteen—it was impossible! Why, she herself could not be more than seven or eight and twenty, and surely she had told him the child was between seven and eight. Then the two girls—she had never even mentioned their existence. Oh! it must be some strange mistake of this well-meaning but puzzle-headed

young curate—it must be some other Mrs. Roston; and yet he remembered with a start that she had said her boy was in Cumberland. Sir Clement felt as if oppressed by a nightmare, and almost mechanically took up another letter. But its first words showed him a confirmation of what he had already read.

“SIR,

“Seeing by the papers that you have married Mrs. Roston, widow of Colonel Roston, of H. M. Indian Army, I beg to forward to you the account for the education and board of her daughters, Miss Hilda and Miss Ella Roston, instalments of which have at intervals been forwarded to Mrs. Roston, without, however, eliciting any response. The account, as you will perceive, extends over two years, which period has elapsed since the sudden death of Mrs. Millington, aunt of the young ladies in question, and sister of Colonel Roston, who charged herself with their education, and most punctually discharged all accounts during her life. I must request prompt payment of the



account, as, if it is not paid, I shall be obliged to dismiss the young ladies at once, and be under the disagreeable necessity of suing for the amount.

“I am, sir, yours respectfully,

“PRISCILLA HORMUND.

“Minerva Villa, St. John's Wood.”

It could hardly be that two persons were mistaken. Two Colonel Rostons surely could not have died and left widows called Cecilia. Poor Sir Clement! it was a rude shattering of his idol to find that he had been so completely kept in the dark—he could not yet, even to himself, call it deceived. He who above everything valued openness and perfect sincerity. It was a hard trial.

He took up the letters and went to his wife's room. When he entered, she turned first red and then very white; it was clear that by some means she guessed that he had been enlightened. He put the letters into her hand without a word, and sat down, watching her as she read. Most men would have cross-questioned



her first, without telling her what they knew, but Sir Clement was too high-minded ; it would have seemed to him like laying a trap for her, a thing the very notion of which was abhorrent to him. She read them both through, and then covered her face with her hands.

"Is it true?" he asked, hoping even against hope to hear her indignantly deny it.

"Some of it—not all. Oh! Clement, remember your promise, that whatever people told you, whatever was said, you would always believe that I did it all for love of you."

"But what have I to do with a great deal of it?"

"You have with the fact that I concealed about the children from you. I saw that you did not like children, and—and I wished to make myself attractive in your eyes. Oh! Clement, do you not understand? Perhaps it was weak, silly, what you will, but I thought, if you knew I was nine and thirty, and had grown-up children, you would never care for me. I know I look young, and am pretty—lovely, people say—and I loved you, and longed that you should



care for me. If you had known that I was an elderly woman, with an almost grown-up son, what chance had I of winning your love?"

It is an instinct of human nature to be tender to faults committed from love of one's self. Sir Clement was no exception to the rule, but his love of truth and integrity was stronger than his vanity, and he said,

"But even if you suppressed your age and the children, as you say, for love of me, why did you let me think you friendless? It seems there is a relative of Colonel Roston's living in London who once before befriended you, and——"

"That is false!" cried Lady Wychwood, hastily; "he did all he could to make my husband suspect and insult me."

Sir Clement paused. Certainly, he reflected, Mr. Roston having opened his mind to a total stranger like the Cumberland curate did not seem as if he were friendly towards his cousin's widow.

"Nothing," cried Lady Wychwood, vehemently—"nothing would induce me to enter

that man's house. I should never call him a friend."

"And were you really so destitute as you led me to believe? Forgive me, Cecilia, but you must remember

'What a tangled web we weave,
When first we venture to deceive!'

Naturally I do not know what that you told me is true, and what is not."

"I honestly confess I was not destitute," said Lady Wychwood; "but"—laying her hand softly on her husband's—"that, too, was to win you—or rather it was to compel you to make up your mind. I hoped, I thought I knew, that you loved me, but I feared that you would not speak during the voyage, and I felt that if once we left the vessel, and you lost sight of me, my chance, my hope would be gone. Other interests would absorb you, other friends claim you. I should only be remembered, if at all, as having somewhat lightened the tedium of your voyage. Can you forgive me, Clement? Can you understand that I loved you so dearly

that the mere thought of losing you made me desperate?"

She twined her hands round his arm, and raised her lovely blue eyes to his face. He would surely have been more than mortal if he had not felt softened and flattered. He bent down and kissed her, but he still looked distressed.

"You must have a poor idea of your own fascinations," he said, "if you think that, after having enjoyed your society so much as I had done on board the *Benares*, I could so easily forget you. I wish, dear, you had trusted me. Truth and honesty are the qualities I most value, and I cannot bear to feel that, from any cause, my wife has failed in them. Now, dear, I shall expect you to be always perfectly open with me. Promise that I shall not be disappointed."

"You shall not indeed, Clement; besides,"—with another appealing glance—"I have *you* now, what more could I ever want."

It was very sweet, and Sir Clement felt sorely tempted to say no more about the letters, but



he felt that this would be weak and foolish; there was still much that required explanation, it was better to get all disagreeable questions over at once. Lady Wychwood had evidently hoped the whole business was over, and was disappointed when, again taking up Mr. Corbyn's letter, he said,

"There are still some things, Cecilia, about which I must ask you. What is this about your having charge of all your husband's affairs, and his believing that your son was at Eton?"

"A wicked invention of Mr. Roston's," said Lady Wychwood, her blue eyes flashing. "I cannot tell you the wickedness of that man! Colonel Roston asked him to meet me when I came home with the children, and because I accepted a few civilities from an old friend, Captain Lauriston—who, with his sister, came home in the same vessel—he circulated all sorts of injurious reports respecting me, and even wrote to my husband, and talked in England about a divorce. I ask you, if there had been a word of truth in such a thing, is it likely that, on his return to India, Captain Lauriston



should have been received by my husband as a welcome guest, and have remained his friend till he finally left India four years ago? Mr. Roston made love to me himself, and was furious at his overtures being repelled. It was revenge that made him malign me as he did. It is true that I did manage all my husband's affairs, and he always made me sign his cheques, but the word Eton was never mentioned. He helped a good many needy relations, he was the most generous of men, and we certainly always had an excellent account of this Utterthwaite School. If what Mr. Corbyn says is true, it must have deteriorated strangely."

"When did you see Captain Lauriston last?"

Sir Clement hardly liked to ask the question. It seemed almost as if he doubted his wife's explanation of Mr. Roston's malice.

"Four years ago, when he was staying with us at Simla, just before he left India."

"Do you correspond with him?"

"Hardly a regular correspondence. We write occasionally. He wrote to me on my poor



husband's death, and I wrote to him when I was coming home."

"To ask him to meet you?"

"Clement! you *know* no one met me, and he is an old friend—he would most certainly have come."

Sir Clement walked once or twice up and down the room. Then he said,

"Cecilia, did you write and tell him of our marriage?"

"No; the last time I wrote it was from India."

"You say"—and he put his arm round her—"that all you have done was for love of me—your love must, then, necessarily be very great. Will you give me one more proof of it? Will you give up this friend, and neither write to him nor see him again?"

She started.

"Clement, do you distrust me?"

"God forbid, my darling, but you know the saying: 'Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion.' I could not endure the very lightest breath against you; and as by unfortunate circum-

stances, of which, believe me, I fully accept your explanation, Captain Lauriston's name has been connected with yours, I ask you to give up his acquaintance. It surely is not a very hard thing to ask of you."

"But, Clement, if I meet him—I have known him so well—how can I cut him without any cause? And if he writes to me—you shall see the letter, if he does—what am I to do?"

"Wait till he writes, and then we will consider. Meanwhile you are not likely to meet him at Wychwood, and much may happen before we go to London next spring. And now I have one more question to ask, why have you left Mrs. Hormund's bill unpaid?"

"I was never quite sure it was rightfully owing. Mrs. Millington charged herself with the girls, and sent them to a school I did not approve. She sided with Mr. Roston, and said everything that was false and cruel of me. We always understood she had left money to pay for the girls till they were eighteen, and I thought it better to leave the matter alone till I could come home and see about it."



"One thing, Cecilia, I cannot understand, and that is how you could have spent a whole week in London, and not have gone to see your girls. I should have thought you would have flown to Minerva Villa the very first day."

"I felt so weak and ill that I dreaded being laid up and postponing our marriage. And I did not feel equal to an encounter with Mrs. Hormund, and going into all the details of the business. And you, dear, will understand, and will see all about it for me."

"Did you not even write to the girls?"

"No—that would have been as bad; Mrs. Hormund would have been down upon me at once."

"Well, as we go back I will settle it. Let me see, this is Wednesday. If we leave this day week, I can go to her on Thursday. I will write and tell her, and, while you are enjoying yourself with the girls, I will settle with her."

"Dearest Clement, you are more than good. But I will not go to Minerva Villa,—the girls



must come to me. I could not face a woman who was a friend of Judith Millington's, and who of course believes all that she and Mrs. Norton say of me."

"Then of course you do not wish to leave the girls under her charge?"

"I should like of all things to remove them, but it will take some time to find a suitable school. I am afraid."

"Why should they go to school again? Why should they not come home to Wychwood? They are just of an age to be charming companions to my little Mignonette?"

She rose and put her arms round his neck.

"Clement, you are the dearest, best, and kindest of husbands. But I cannot inflict a ready-made family upon you; I cannot take advantage of your goodness."

"Nonsense, my love! Where should your children live but with you? I assure you, at Wychwood there is room enough and to spare, and a few young people will cheer the old place. As to Wilfred, of course he will not

live at home, but we must have him there for a time to see what his tastes and capabilities are, and then settle what to do with him."

"How shall I ever thank you?"

"All you can do, Cecilia, is always to be open as the day; never to allow the slightest concealment between us. I had rather you told me what was most painful and distressing, than conceal it, as I know some women do conceal trouble from their husbands with the best of motives. Do this, and love me and my little Mignonette, and I shall ask for nothing more."

"Indeed, Clement, you may trust me."

"I will, Cecilia, I do implicitly. But remember that, if my faith is once shaken, it can never again be re-established. You have so clearly explained the reason of your deception on the voyage that I forgive you that—but never attempt it in the slightest particular again. And now I am going out; I promised to go with Dermott, on some business he required help in. I shall be in for luncheon;" and with a fond kiss he left the room.



Lady Wychwood gave a deep sigh of intense relief.

“It is over, and far better than I expected,” she said, half aloud. “I wonder if there is anything in the world men will not believe if you only touch their vanity.”

Then, seating herself at the table, she began to write rapidly, and, when the thick letter was completed, directed it to :

Captain Lauriston,

Albany,

London,

and put it into her pocket.

CHAPTER X.

All other doubts by time let them be clear'd ;
 Fortune brings some in boats that are not steer'd.
Cymbeline. Act 4, Scene 3.

Riches are mine, fortune is in my hand.
Paradise Regained. Book 3.

CAPTAIN LAURISTON was seated at breakfast in his chambers in the Albany between eleven and twelve. He was a tall, slight, fair man, looking younger than his age, which was about seven and thirty. There was a weary look about the eyes, as if he were tired of most things, and did not look forward to the future with any keen prospect of enjoyment. He always said he could have found life pleasant enough if he had had the money to enjoy him-



self upon, but that indispensable means of pleasure had always been wanting to him. The only son of a clergyman of small means, he had entered the Indian Army, and spent the greater portion of his life in India. Indolent by nature, he had never chosen to study the language, or to qualify for a staff appointment, and had rejoiced exceedingly when, on a distant relative dying about four years previously and leaving him an income of £500 a year, he was able to resign his commission and leave India for ever. When he returned to England, he found himself nearly alone in the world; his father and mother were both dead, and of his three sisters one was married to a merchant at Shanghai, another to a settler in Canada, and only one remained in England, the wife of a highly successful stockbroker in London, who had a town-house in Hyde Park Gardens, and a pretty villa at Maidenhead. Mrs. Cawton had always been his favourite sister, and he was to start in a few days to join her and her somewhat pompous husband at a shooting-lodge which the latter had taken for the season in Inverness.



shire, and from whence he wrote tempting accounts of both grouse and salmon.

Cecilia Roston had been the passion of Vere Lauriston's life, in so much as his somewhat phlegmatic nature was capable of passion. He had hung about her from the time of her first arrival, a perfect vision of beauty, in India, and he was well aware that he had seriously injured her reputation. On his return to India, after the visit to England, when their evident intimacy so gravely shocked Mr. Roston and Mrs. Millington, he had feebly resolved to avoid her; but Fate decreed that he should be quartered at the same station as Colonel Roston, and she immediately resumed her old empire over him. It was certainly more her doing than his—he only let himself drift along the tide of what, if indiscreet, was yet very pleasant. Colonel Roston liked him extremely, and persistently turned a deaf ear to all hints and insinuations respecting him and his beautiful wife, whom he adored, and who could, he believed, do no wrong.

Mrs. Roston professed herself quite broken-



hearted when Captain Lauriston finally left India; and, though she speedily consoled herself with fresh adorers, he was, of course, unaware of it, and, on hearing of Colonel Roston's death, wrote at once imploring her to marry him. He was not, perhaps, still very much in love with her; in the four years that had elapsed since they met he had insensibly freed himself from the fascination which the sight of her beauty always threw over him, and he was perhaps rather sorry to think that the life of pleasant freedom which he so enjoyed must be brought to a close; but he conceived himself to have no alternative. Mrs. Roston's reputation had suffered through him; she always professed affection for him; there was no other course open to him but to offer her his name. So he wrote with a somewhat regretful sigh, and wished most cordially that his old friend had lived for many years.

In due course he received an acceptance of his proposal in the most affectionate terms, and Mrs. Roston, saying she was not yet quite sure by which steamer she should sail, promised to

telegraph to him from Gibraltar. From the day when he received that letter he had heard nothing of her, and it may be conceived with what amazement he encountered her issuing from the door of St. George's—a bride!

The love which he had thought dead suddenly revived at the sight of the loveliness which had gradually been growing dim in his memory since their separation; and, even if he did not care for the prize himself, it was unendurable that another should enjoy what was his of right. It was not wonderful that he spoke bitterly in answer to Mrs. Davenant's question. He had never once doubted Cecilia's love for him; at one time it had been his glory and delight, and, though of late his own feelings had sensibly cooled, he had never once dreamt of the possibility of a change in hers. She had duped and betrayed him! and he had paced up and down his room in fierce indignation. Of course the man she had married was rich, that was the explanation of it. Women always were mercenary; it was mere folly to talk of their hearts! There was not one of them who did



prefer diamonds and old lace, velvet dresses and fine carriages, to all the devotion that men could bestow upon them. Well, he should not fret, not he! He had done what was honourable, what he considered himself bound to do, and he really believed he was well out of it. Only she might have had the decency to tell him she had changed her mind, and not have left him to find out her marriage by mere chance.

He little guessed that Cecilia, who firmly believed that he was madly and passionately in love with her, had dreaded beyond measure his even discovering that she was in England, and had kept herself rigorously imprisoned during her stay in London, lest, by some untoward chance, she should meet him before it was too late for his interference to be unavailing. It had been with fear and trembling that, thickly veiled, she had ventured forth for even the absolutely requisite amount of shopping, and she had never breathed freely from the time she set foot in England until the fateful words were spoken. To have schemed successfully for the



one thing for which she had longed all her life, a rich husband, and to have had the cup dashed from her very lips, would have been more than she could have borne; and, certain that those whom it is most desirable not to see are always those sure to make their appearance, she determined to avoid all danger by staying at home. So the two were completely at cross-purposes, each believing the other to be passionately in love, while each really cared far more for his and her own comfort and convenience.

A very few days reconciled Vere Lauriston to what had happened. When the first soreness at Cecilia's desertion and treachery had passed away, he began to tell himself it was all for the best. Five hundred a year was a very comfortable income for a bachelor, but, even united to whatever Mrs. Roston's fortune might be, it would not be much to support a wife and three nearly grown-up children. He wondered vaguely what her husband had left; he knew he was well off, and he coloured as he thought how often Cecilia had helped him to pay his debts with money which Colonel Roston inno-



cently believed had been dedicated to some very different purpose. He wondered vaguely how she would like her life without the constant excitement of her Indian flirtations. Whenever her husband's regiment had been at a dull station, she had always contrived to go away either to the hills or somewhere where amusement could be obtained; an English country life would be little to her taste. He could not fancy her either with the children; she had cared so little for them, and been so unfeignedly glad to deposit them in England. Well, that page of his life was over, and really, now he came to think of it, he felt both freer and brighter than he had done since Colonel Roston's death.

He was revolving all this for the hundredth time in his mind when the servant brought in the letters, two or three bills and circulars, a foreign letter, and one in a business-like, unknown hand.

Ah! a letter from Cecilia at last. He wondered she had not written before. What would she say to excuse herself?



“Hotel du Louvre, September 5th.

“MY DEAREST VERE,

“I am sure you will have wondered at not hearing from me before this to explain what must seem to you so extraordinary; but I know all you must be suffering, and I really hardly know how to write. Have you blamed me very bitterly, Vere, for the ruin I have brought on your hopes of happiness? Can you ever forgive me? I hope you will, when you hear my reasons.

“You will not, even in your wildest anger, have believed that I have ceased to feel for you as I have always done—you have known me too long and too well for that. What I did was for *your own* sake and that of the children. When you wrote to me in my loneliness I could not harden my heart, and say ‘No,’ as I felt that I ought to do. But in the long, solitary hours it became more and more clear to me that I must give up the happiness of my life—that I could not, must not marry you. What right had I, dearest Vere, to entail poverty upon you, and the charge of my three fatherless children? And then for them—



Oh! it is bitter to say it, but you will understand me—you know what slanderous tongues have said of our friendship. Would they not find confirmation of their wicked imaginings if we married immediately on my poor husband's death, and a slur be cast on my innocent children? I asked myself all this, Vere, and my reason told me I must give you up, in spite of all the pleadings of my heart. Feel for me, Vere. You will, I know, when you read this, and realise all I have undergone.

“Well, I came home in the *Benares*. Do you remember our voyage home in her twelve years ago? I thought all the memories would be too much for me—I could hardly go on board! Sir Clement Wychwood was on board very ill, only just recovering from fever. You know that I have had experience of Indian fevers, and that I am not a bad nurse; and I did what I could for him. Then he fell violently in love with me, and—again I thought of you and the children. I knew that, loving me as you did, you would never accept my decision, and I doubted my own resolution in



face of your passionate pleading. Then Sir Clement is rich—and, though you know me well enough to be sure that *that* will not for an instant weigh with me, still I paused, and thought what an advantage it would be to the children, poor things! So, Vere, I sacrificed myself to what I believed to be my plain duty. You will ask why I did not write and tell you. Because I feared both you and myself—I knew you would fly to my side, pray, and implore me to change my decision, and adjure me to remember our old, happy days, and I felt that, if you did, I should yield, and that that would be disadvantageous for us both; so, with difficulty, I kept silence.

“Oh, Vere! if I could tell you what I felt that day on the steps of St. George’s when I heard your voice! But words could never tell! Sir Clement is all that is good and kind, but he has a mania for what he calls ‘straight-forwardness,’ and can only see one side of a question. I dare not tell him the whole story of our acquaintance. Already two mischief-makers, creatures of Mr. Roston’s,



have written to him, trying to poison his mind against me, and mentioning you in the blackest terms. I told him—what Heaven knows is true enough—that you were always a great favourite with poor dear Claud, and I don't for a moment imagine he believed the vile insinuations against me; but he said, 'Cæsar's wife must not be suspected,' and made a point of my giving you up—neither seeing nor writing to you. Of course I was obliged to acquiesce—we poor women are never free to follow the dictates of our own hearts—so when you write, which you must sometimes, write under cover to 'Miss Sands,'—she is my maid—and it will be all right. And of course we must meet sometimes, but how and where is a matter which I must arrange later. Only I implore you, dearest Vere, do nothing rash; for you may do me infinite injury, but no good. *Do not recognize me if we meet.* I will contrive some means by which we may see each other without danger. And do not be hard upon me, even in your thoughts. Think of all I have re



nounced for *my duty* and for *your dear sake*,
and believe me

“Yours as ever,

“CECILIA WYCHWOOD.

“P.S.—We go home to Wychwood Manor,
Chinton, Limeshire, next week.”

Captain Lauriston read the letter through very attentively. He was hardly inclined to credit Lady Wychwood with much self-sacrifice, being tolerably well acquainted with her character, and the frequent references to the “*dear children*” made him smile somewhat sardonically; he well knew how little she cared for them, but he was quite willing to believe in her devotion to himself, and to credit her assertions that it had been a terrible struggle to give him up. He hardly confessed it to himself, but now that his first feeling of mortification and anger was over, his certainty of freedom was an immense relief. He smiled as he re-read her fears that, if he had known of her intentions, he would have prevented the marriage. No, indeed, all was for the best; and though, of course,



poor thing, it was hard upon her, and she would never cease to regret him, still rank and wealth would comfort her, and no doubt she would be fairly happy. As for the meetings she talked of—well, they would see. If Sir Clement objected, he did not in the least wish to put himself in a disagreeable position, and clandestine proceedings were always dangerous. He must just answer her letter, of course, and then the whole thing had better drop quietly.

This settled, he languidly looked through the other letters, and finally opened the one in an unknown hand. The first few lines were sufficient to rouse him thoroughly.

“MY LORD,

“We must apologise for addressing our letter to you as Captain Lauriston, but judged it better to do so, as our communication may reach you the more readily. It is our duty to inform you of the sudden decease of your lordship’s very distant cousin, Lord Hexham, which occurred at his residence, Hexham Castle, on Tuesday evening. His late lordship,



who was the fifteenth baron, was married some years since to Lady Violet Borton, but this lady pre-deceased him, and there is no issue of the marriage. The title and estates, of the value of about £25,000 a year, therefore revert to you as heir-at-law, you being the only son of Gustavus, eldest son of Henry Dorimer (who took the name of Lauriston in compliance with the will of his godfather), eldest surviving son of William Dorimer, third son of Geoffrey, ninth Baron Hexham, temp. William III.

“ We shall be glad if you will at once communicate with us, and you will without doubt wish to attend the funeral of the late lamented peer as chief mourner, after which all business matters can of course be entered into. You will find the estates in excellent order, the late peer having devoted much time and attention to them.

“ We have the honour to be, my lord,

“ Your lordship’s obedient servants,

“ KITE AND SILVERTONGUE,

“ Solicitors for the Hexham estates.

“ 190, Lincoln’s Inn Fields.”



Vere Lauriston, the new Lord Hexham, lay back in his chair, and fairly gasped with amazement. He Lord Hexham!—he possessor of £25,000 a year ! He shook himself, to be quite sure that he was not dreaming. His cousin was a man but a few years older than himself, and he had been in the belief that there were several more Dorimers, descendants of the second son of “Geoffrey, ninth baron,” who stood between him and the title. Perhaps, indeed, it would be more correct to say that he had never thought about it, certainly never with the idea of such an event occurring as his succeeding to the title and estates. He wondered vaguely what had become of the cousins who stood a degree nearer to the late lord than himself; he supposed they must all have died while he was in India, and no one had ever thought it worth while to tell him. He had never seen the late peer, so it was, of course, absurd for him to affect much sorrow for his loss; but one regret he did cordially feel, that his father had not lived to inherit. He had once, when a young man, stayed at Hexham,



and had conceived such an admiration and love for the place that he was wont to describe it over and over again to his children, who used laughingly to call it "father's fairy palace." How he would have enjoyed possessing it, and the son gave a sigh to the thought, for he had loved the old man very dearly.

But, as was not unnatural, his own good fortune soon engrossed all his thoughts. It was fairly bewildering, and he spent fully an hour in day-dreams of all he would do and enjoy. He should hardly be able to go up to the Cawtons now, he should have more than enough to do now at Hexham; but they had better pay him a visit on their way back from Scotland. How it would please Mr. Cawton to have a wife who was the Honourable! and indeed he did not think Theresa herself would be displeased. He sat down and wrote to the lawyers, announcing his intention of being present at the funeral, and then set off for a long walk as a sort of safety valve for his not unnatural excitement. He met with no friends: Mid-September is perhaps the very emptiest



time of the whole London year. He walked twice round the park without seeing a single familiar face. Later on he dined at his club, and there met one man whom he knew, one with whom he had more than once been quartered in India. By this time his longing for some one to whom to tell his good fortune was great, and before dinner was over Colonel Bulstrode was in possession of the facts, and also of many of the new peer's schemes and intentions, besides having accepted an invitation to stay at Hexham in December.

At length, considerably bored, and perhaps slightly envious of his friend's good fortune, he essayed a change of topic. He had seen a good deal of Captain Lauriston in company with Mrs. Roston, and, believing him to be desperately in love, had expected, on seeing the announcement of Colonel Roston's death, that he was certain to marry her. He had therefore been immensely surprised by seeing the marriage of Sir Clement and Lady Wychwood in the *Times*.

"I thought I should have had to congratu-



late you on another score," he said: "poor Roston! You were always so devoted to the fair Cecilia that I thought that when once the obstacle was removed——"

"She is married," said Lord Hexham, quietly.

"Yes, so I saw. As I say, it surprised me. Do you know the man she married well?"

"I never saw him but once for a moment. A Limeshire baronet, and very rich, I believe."

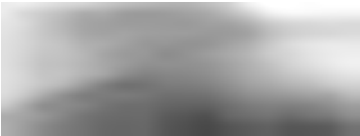
"Well, if she has kept her looks, he has a lovely wife. But she is getting on—she must be near forty."

"She is as handsome and looks as young as ever."

"Ah, well! some women have the trick of it! I can't think how they manage it. A good digestion and no heart, some people say."

"I don't see that anyone has a right to say that Lady Wychwood has no heart."

"I'm sure I haven't, I know nothing about it. You ought to know best, Lauriston—I beg your pardon—Hexham. You certainly saw enough of her at one time."



In the excitement of his new position, Lord Hexham had completely forgotten Lady Wychwood's letter, and as he walked home he reflected that it required an answer. But it was hardly an easy one to write, and after he had put off the evil hour by writing a long epistle to his sister Mrs. Cawton, he sat for long considering before he drew the blotting book to him, and began writing rapidly.

"MY DEAR CECILIA,

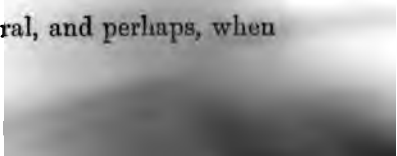
"I do not wish to pain you, and what is done cannot be recalled, but I cannot describe to you what my feelings were when I saw you the bride of another. You might have trusted me surely, never to demur to anything that was for your interest or happiness, and at least have let me know your intention and saved me such a shock. However, it is passed, and we must let all by-gones be by-gones. Of course I was awfully touched by all you said about having done it for my sake and the children's.

"I hope you haven't sacrificed yourself too



much, and that Sir Clement is a good sort of fellow. In face of what he has said, you cannot be too careful about letters and meetings. I don't want ever to get you into trouble again. And now I must tell you of a change in my affairs, which will surprise you almost as much as it has me. My cousin, Lord Hexham, died on Tuesday, and I got a letter yesterday from the lawyers to say the title and the estates come to me! Rather a change from £500 to five and twenty thousand! and one which, as you know, will well suit my tastes and habits. I can hardly yet believe it. I thought, if indeed I ever thought at all of anything so remote, that there were any number of Dorimers (Dorimer is the family name, not Lauriston—my grandfather took the latter for a fortune, which he immediately proceeded to run through, worse luck!) between me and the title, but they have, I suppose, disappeared, or the lawyers would of course know about them.

“Of course it makes a wonderful difference to me, and my head feels all in a whirl. I am going down to the funeral, and perhaps, when



I really see the place, I shall feel more like believing it all. If this had come a little sooner, perhaps you would not have been so ready to throw me over. I mean, of course, that then you could not have thought, as you so amiably did, of not liking to be a 'burden' to me, as if you or yours could ever be that—you should have known me better. However, as I said before, that page is closed, and when we meet in the future as Lady Wychwood and Lord Hexham it will be on a different footing. Ah! it will not be so sweet as the old days. Well,

‘ All that's bright must fade,
The brightest still the fleetest,’

and the only wise thing is to make the best of what is left to us. By the way, 'Miss Sands' is a new acquisition, is she not? I think it would be wise to trust to her good offices as little as possible.

“ Ever yours,

“ HEXHAM.”

When the letter was finished, and he was



refreshing himself with his final cigar, he muttered,

“Poor Cecilia ! if she could only have known, we should have heard nothing of her ‘duty’ and the ‘interests of the dear children!’ If she had only waited, she would have been quite as rich, and—a peeress! How angry she will be!”

CHAPTER XI.

She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear'd.

Much Ado about Nothing. Act 3, Scene 1.

WHEN Mrs. Davenant and Colonel Wychwood were left alone on the steps of St. George's, by the abrupt departure of the gentleman who had announced that Lady Wychwood had deceived him, they looked at each other in dismay. But it was manifestly impossible to remain where they were, and Colonel Wychwood handed his niece into her carriage, and got in after her.

"Oh! Uncle George," she exclaimed, almost before the door was shut, "is not this too

terrible? Poor dear Clement! What had we better do?"

"Nothing," said Colonel Wychwood, decidedly.

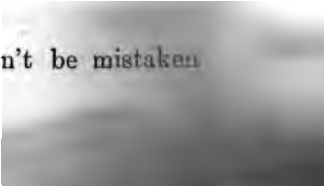
"Nothing! Oh! Uncle George, surely you can't mean that?"

"Yes, indeed, my dear Matilda, I do; it is the *only* course, in my opinion. May I ask what you would propose?"

"Oh! to write to Clement at once and tell him everything."

"You have little or nothing to tell. A gentleman, whose name we do not know, whom we never saw before, and whom I, for one, should not recognize if I saw again, tells us somewhat melodramatically that Lady Wychwood has deceived him. We have no means of knowing that his statement is true. She herself, as you heard, said, 'a mistake, I think,' when he uttered her name, and it is very likely a case of mistaken identity. I think it would be foolish to attach too much importance to the matter."

"But, Uncle George, it can't be mistaken



identity, at any rate. You forget he asked you, and you gave her name, Mrs. Roston."

No, Colonel Wychwood had by no means forgotten it, but he had devoutly hoped it might have escaped his niece. He was most anxious to prevent her moving in the matter, being certain that, in Sir Clement's present state of infatuation with his wife, she would do no good, and sincerely deprecating the slightest approach to a family quarrel. He had not a very high opinion of the discretion of women in general, or of Mrs. Davenant in particular, and felt that, if she interfered in the matter, mischief was certain to ensue. In his own mind he had little doubt that the stranger had spoken the truth, and that Lady Wychwood had been engaged to him, but had thrown him over for Sir Clement. He had thought Mrs. Roston's absolute destitution of relatives, and, above all, her persistent objection to stir from the house during her stay in London, both remarkable and suspicious, but he felt that no interference of his would be of the slightest avail, and had therefore said nothing; and he only hoped nothing



derogatory to the dignity of the family might ever be discovered respecting Mrs. Roston's antecedents, so he replied,

"Ah! so he did. Well, he was in a very excited state, and I should not pay a great deal of attention to what he said. I should advise you, my dear Matilda, to forget the incident as soon as possible; or, if you cannot do that, at any rate never on any account to refer to it."

"But don't you think Clement ought to know? I declare it makes one quite nervous and suspicious. Suppose it was some one she had married before?"

"My dear Matilda, you never read anything but novels, I believe, and I am given to understand the principal turning-point in the majority of them is bigamy. They must have turned your brain, or you would remember that Mrs. Roston has only been a widow nine months, and that your suggestion is hardly probable. You had better accept Lady Wychwood's own solution, that it was a mistake, and dismiss the matter from your mind."



"I am afraid I can hardly promise to do that, Uncle George."

"Well, my dear, at any rate promise me never to breathe a syllable on the subject to a single human being."

"Do you really mean you shall not tell Clement?"

"My dear, I never was a mischief-maker yet, and never mean to be. If people were only a little less ready to chatter—with the best possible intentions, of course—the world would go on much more smoothly. Come, Matilda, you must see the sense of what I say; promise me to say nothing."

Somewhat reluctantly, Mrs. Davenant gave the promise. She really felt as if it were her duty to "warn poor dear Clement," and was not quite averse to the idea of the excitement which her announcement might cause. Still "Uncle George" was always looked up to in the family as a model of worldly wisdom, and she had not the courage to maintain her opinion in opposition to his. So, with many misgivings and headshakings, she gave way, and



returned to her family at Littlehampton, where, as Colonel Wychwood said to himself with infinite satisfaction, she would not be likely to see anyone to whom to chatter until she had had time somewhat to forget what had happened.

It was towards the end of September that Sir Clement and Lady Wychwood returned from Paris, and, the day after, Sir Clement set off to Minerva Villa to satisfy Mrs. Hormund's claims, and to bring back the two girls.

"I declare I feel quite nervous," said Lady Wychwood to him at breakfast; "it is twelve years since I saw my girls, and only think, living with Mrs. Millington, what a terrible idea must have been given them of me!"

"My dear Cecilia, no woman would be guilty of such an enormity as blackening a mother to her own children!"

"Ah! Clement, how little you know what spite makes people capable of! Mrs. Millington was furious at her brother marrying, and she hated me for being good-looking; she was frightful herself. I believe she had quite as

much to do with inventing stories about me as Mr. Roston."

"Well, my love," said Sir Clement, kissing her, "no one will invent stories about you now, and I am sure you will find that the children have been brought up to look forward to nothing so much as seeing and living with you."

Sir Clement was not favourably impressed by the aspect of Minerva Villa, and the drawing-room into which he was ushered did not give him a very high idea of Mrs. Hormund's refinement. The walls were of a very brilliant pink, and the ceiling, which was rather low, was adorned with a profusion of gilding, while the mirrors had excessively florid frames. The chimney-piece had a valance and curtains of turquoise blue satin, embroidered with large pink roses and trimmed with white lace, while the fireplace was filled with white and gold shavings, on which reposed a wreath of artificial roses. The furniture was of sky-blue cretonne, with a pattern of roses and cupids, and every chair had a crocheted or netted antimacassar, not confined to its legitimate position on the



back of the chair, but stretched from the top of the back to the edge of the seat; the muslin curtains were lined with pink and tied back with blue satin bows. Sir Clement was left for some little time to admire the beauties of this gorgeous apartment before Mrs. Hormund made her appearance.

The first word that occurred to his mind when she appeared was the epithet "genteel." She was of a washed-out, whity-brown appearance, with very long, thin, bony hands, which she evidently considered worthy of notice and waved about perpetually. She spoke with a languid drawl, and a manner as if everything was too much trouble to think about, which was, however, somewhat contradicted by the extremely quick, sharp glances of her piercing brown eyes. Sir Clement had of course written to announce his coming, and she had dressed herself to receive him in a brilliant violet moiré, which, in that pink and blue room, made a combination of colour almost too excruciating for endurance. He found himself hoping fervently that taste was not one

of the "subjects" undertaken by Mrs. Hormund.

"We had better transact our business first," he said, after the preliminary phrases had passed. "Here is the corrected account you forwarded to me yesterday, and here is the cheque for the amount."

"I am sure," said Mrs. Hormund, in her drawling voice, which inspired her auditor with a wish either to prick her or give her a shake, "it is a good fortune I hardly hoped for, ever to get my money at all. When poor dear Mrs. Millington died so suddenly, dear, kind Mr. Roston warned me to be careful, as I should probably never see another shilling."

"I am at a loss to conceive why he should have meddled in the matter," said Sir Clement, coldly.

"Ah, well, of course you know there were so many things—Mrs. Roston's sad character, and——"

"Please to remember, madam," said Sir Clement, coldly, "that you are speaking of Lady Wychwood, and that I am not inclined to



endure impertinence either at first or at second-hand."

A faint tinge of colour rose to Mrs. Hormund's cheek, and she answered,

"Perhaps, if Sir Clement Wychwood were aware of all the circumstances, and knew as much about Mrs. Roston—I beg pardon, Lady Wychwood—as I do, he might be inclined to be thankful to those who have kept her daughters from her."

With a violent effort Sir Clement controlled himself.

"You may spare your base insinuations, madam," he said, sternly. "Lady Wychwood was quite prepared to find that she had been traduced and maliciously spoken of, and has put me in possession of all facts; therefore you may spare yourself the trouble and the crime of disseminating slander. Your receipt? Thank you. Perhaps you will kindly see that the Miss Rostons are ready. I will await them in the garden. Good morning," and before Mrs. Hormund could say another word he had left the room.



Fully twenty minutes elapsed before the door opened, and two girls emerged, followed by a maid-servant, who called to the cabman to come and help her with a box. Sir Clement quite started at the likeness between the eldest girl and his wife. Of course there was not Cecilia's grace; for Hilda was but sixteen, and as gawky as a tall girl of that age generally is. But there were the same features, the same hair and appealing blue eyes, the same caressing, confiding manner.

"How good of you to come for us," she said, putting her hand into Sir Clement's with an upward glance that might have been her mother's own; "and oh! how nice to think we are going away!"

"I am afraid that sounds as if you had not been very happy," said Sir Clement.

"Not for the last two years," said Hilda.

"Not since Aunt Millington died," added Ella.

"Well, I hope we shall make up to you for it now," said Sir Clement. "Get in, my dears. Is that small box all your luggage?"

"Yes," said Hilda, blushing.

"And it isn't half full," said Ella, a bright, dark little girl, not in the slightest degree like her sister.

"Well, it doesn't much matter," said Sir Clement, who already felt a sincere pity for what he was sure the two girls had suffered. "All deficiencies can be very speedily rectified in London. How anxious you must be to see your mother!"

"Yes indeed," said Hilda, very earnestly; "but I can scarcely remember her."

"I suppose," said Ella, hesitating, and fixing her large dark eyes on Sir Clement's face, "I suppose all the dreadful things Mrs. Hormund used to say of mamma are stories? But Aunt Millington used to say them too."

"Oh! Ella, how can you ask?" cried Hilda.

"My dear," said Sir Clement, "your aunt was doubtless a very good woman, though she was, unfortunately, prejudiced against your mother; but I wonder she had not more sense of decency than to speak ill of her to her children—it is monstrous! As you will

see, your mother is everything that is charming."

"And are we really to live at home, and not go back to school?" asked Hilda. "Mrs. Hornmund was very angry at our being taken away, and said that she supposed it was only because she had been chosen by Aunt Millington, and that we should go now to some very inferior school."

"I hope you will live and enjoy yourselves at Wychwood Manor," said Sir Clement. "I have a little daughter not quite your age, and it will be pleasant for you all to study together. It will be a great 'change, and, I am sure, a very pleasant one for my little Mignonette. She has lived alone all her life."

"How sad for her! Oh, I hope we shall be very dear friends!" said Hilda.

"I hope so too—but here we are. Now you will see your mother."

"Oh," said Hilda, shrinking up to him, "I feel so nervous. We have always been told mamma could not endure us."

"You seem to have been told a great many

wicked untruths, my dear," said Sir Clement, sternly. "Take my advice, and forget them all as soon as ever you can."

Lady Wychwood received her daughters most affectionately, embracing them fervently, holding them a little way from her to look at them attentively, and then embracing them again with renewed fervour. Sir Clement, after the first, left them entirely to themselves, and when he returned he found his wife on the sofa with an arm round each of her girls' waists, and Hilda's head on her shoulder.

"Oh, Clement," she said, looking up at him, "I feel so shocked and grieved at all these poor children tell me. If I had only realised what they would be made to suffer! Only think, they have been taunted with the bills not being paid, and—how could I be so thoughtless?—they have positively no clothes!"

"Well, that is a want very easily repaired here, fortunately."

"Yes, but it does not make me less guilty. You see, they had been so entirely Mrs. Milington's children for ten years, and she had



made a point of my never writing to them, or interfering with her arrangements, as she called it, that I really forgot that it was necessary for me to order what they required."

"Well, you can begin shopping in earnest this afternoon."

"Yes, but with all haste I fear we cannot be ready to go down to Wychwood on Thursday. You see, the things must be fitted——"

"My dear Cecilia, settle everything according to your convenience. I must run down on Thursday, as I promised McDonald to go through some business on Friday, but I can come back on Saturday, and you can choose your own day."

"How kind you are!" said his wife, looking up at him with an adoring expression that would have recompensed him for a far greater annoyance than the postponement of their arrival at the manor. He went to his room to write some letters, and Lady Wychwood drove out with her girls on a preliminary shopping excursion.

On the Thursday Sir Clement set off for

Wychwood, and early the next morning Lady Wychwood, telling her daughters that she was going on a little business that would not interest them, left the hotel. She was dressed entirely in black, and, as soon as she had turned the corner of the street, took a very thick veil from her pocket and put it on. A few minutes found her in the Albany, with her hand on the bell of Lord Hexham's chambers. She had to ring twice, but at length the door was opened.

"Is Lord Hexham in town?"

"Not at this moment, ma'am, but we expect him in about an hour."

"Kindly give him this note, please," and, without waiting for an answer, she turned away.

She had reason to feel grateful to the thickness of her veil, for as she was emerging into Piccadilly she encountered Colonel Wychwood. What would he have thought or said if he had recognised her?—but of that there was happily no fear. She hailed a hansom, was driven to Victoria, and was presently standing at the door of a semi-detached villa at Balham. The



door was opened by a tidy maid, who looked very doubtfully at the closely-veiled lady, and said she would see whether her mistress, Mrs. Jones, was at home—what name should she say?

“Only a lady who must see her on important business.”

In a few moments the maid returned, and stopping at the bottom of the stairs to say the words, “Upstairs, if you please, ma’am,”—which no amount of instruction can ever induce a parlour-maid to omit—ushered the visitor into a tidy drawing-room, where an old lady half sat, half lay, in a large arm-chair. Lady Wychwood said a few words about a “small matter of business,” and then, when the maid had closed the door, removed her veil and said,

“Mother!”

The old lady started up.

“Cecy! my child, my darling, why did you not let me know?”

“I couldn’t, mother. I didn’t know I should have a free day. You are alone?”

“Yes. Mary is gone out for the day.”



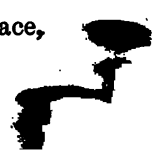
"I am glad of it. You know she wrote to me?"

"No—did she? I begged her not—I said what more could she expect—but she said you were a great lady now. Is it true, Cecy?"

"Yes, mother; but, if Mary has her way, my life will be spoiled. I've married Sir Clement Wychwood. I don't care for him, but he does for me, and I can't help being grateful to him for all he's done for me. He's made as handsome settlements on me as if I'd brought him a fortune. But he's proud as proud, and, if he knew all, he'd never forgive me, and, as I say, my life would be spoiled. Can you make Mary understand this?"

"Yes, I think so; but, dearie, wouldn't it be better and safer to tell him everything? He could only respect you for what you've done, saving off your own dress and pleasure to pay for your brother."

"But he must know *why* I had to pay. No, it must be as I say. I hope soon now I shall be able to pay it all off, but the secret must be kept as religiously as ever. It is the disgrace,



not the money, for which he would care. Do you not see?"

"Yes, dearie, and I will tell Mary—indeed I will, but you know she was always masterful, and I grow less able to struggle."

"Show her it is not for my sake alone, but for yours, hers, above all, Hugh's. And she must not write to me again unless there is some great necessity, it would be awkward to have a letter and not be able to say who it was from, and I have so few correspondents."

"I will tell her all you say, Cecy."

"And how are you, mother?"

"Well, dear, for me, but growing weaker. I am glad to have set eyes on you once more, Cecy. You look as young as when you were here last, though that's——"

"Twelve years ago."

"Dear! is it so long! And the children, Cecy. Ah, I should dearly like to see them."

"I daren't risk it, mother, they are too young to understand the necessity of silence. The two girls are with me now. Hilda is very like me. Ella just like her father."

“And Wilfred?”

“He is still in Cumberland; we thought it better to have him at Wychwood rather than in London.”

“And—don’t be angry, Cecy—but how about that Captain Lauriston—the one you were to marry? I hope he’s not about you still.”

Lady Wychwood flushed angrily.

“Mary wrote me a sermon about that in Paris,” she said, coldly. “Very impertinent of her. What I think fit to do is no business of hers, and she does not understand the society in which I live. Two mischief-making letters were sent to Sir Clement, and he made me promise not to see or write to Captain Lauriston again.”

“Oh, I am glad. I beg your pardon, dear, but you see when a young woman is as handsome as you are, she is sure to have enemies glad to say a spiteful word, and I should like you to begin clear and happy in your new life. How old is Sir Clement?”

“About eight and forty. A widower with a little girl.”

"A girl! Then if you have a son, Cecy——"

"He would be the future baronet."

"Eh! if I could but live to see that."

"Well, mother," said Lady Wychwood, rising, "I must go now. I am glad to have seen you. And you will not forget to tell Mary that, if she insists on forcing the family on Sir Clement's notice, she will do harm to everyone."

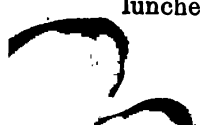
"Yes, yes, I will. I hope she'll listen to me. Good-bye, my beautiful Cecy. You'll come again."

"When I can. We leave London in a day or two; but if we are in town in the spring, I will come again. Good-bye, mother," she kissed the old lady's cheek, replaced her veil, and took her departure.

She reached the hotel in time for luncheon, and found, as she expected, a telegram awaiting her. It was very short:

"*Yes, three sharp.*"

"I think, dears," she said, as they sat at luncheon, "I shall send you with Sands this



afternoon, to see some sight. What would you like best?"

"Won't you come, mamma?" asked Hilda.

"I am rather tired, dear, and should prefer resting. What do you say to Maskelyne and Cook?"

"Oh, how delightful!" cried Ella, and so it was settled, and as soon as the girls, under convoy of the not over well-pleased Sands, had started for the Egyptian Hall, Lady Wychwood again veiled was deposited by a hansom at the Marble Arch. Taking her way straight across the park towards the magazine, she was soon overtaken by Lord Hexham.

"This is a risky business, Cecilia," he said, gravely: "it can't go on. You had better keep your promise to Sir Clement, and cut me altogether?"

"How coolly you talk of it, Vere!" in a mortified tone: "of course I know as well as you do that the risk is too great to be run, and that if you had remained Captain Lauriston it must have been as you say; but there is nothing to connect in Sir Clement's mind Lord Hexham

and Vere Lauriston. When we come to London get acquainted with him, he will introduce you to me, and we shall see each other in society."

"There would be risk for you."

"Not if he did introduce us, for he would not do so if he realised who you were."

"Cecilia, do you not long to be open and above-board? You have such a splendid opening now, do not throw it away for me. Of course, after a long friendship, it is hard to break entirely, but I am ready to do it for your sake."

Lady Wychwood looked annoyed; this readiness to give up her acquaintance did not please her.

"Apparently it would be an easy matter to you," she said, "I don't find it so easy to give up old friends."

"You know better than to think it is easy to me. I only speak for your own advantage."

"Well, do as I say: as Lord Hexham all will be right."



"Well, it shall be as you choose," said Lord Hexham, who hated opposing anyone; then changing his tone, "I say, Cecilia, have you ever paid off that money yet."

"Hugh's? no, there is still nine hundred and fifty pounds. Vere, I saw my mother to-day; she has grown very old and feeble."

"Twelve years do make a difference. Did you see your sister?"

"No, I am glad to say she was out. She—" and then she stopped.

"She has been annoying you?"

"Yes, insisting I ought to bring Sir Clement there."

"And you still intend to keep up the mystery? Another danger."

"I must manage my affairs my own way. Indeed I know best."

"Well, I daresay you do. But what I wanted to say was—you know now I have heaps of money—let me clear off this debt for you and leave you free. I am sure you needn't be too proud to accept it; remember how often you have helped me; if you hadn't, the debt would

have been paid by this time, I verily believe."

"I believe it would," she said. "Well, Vere, as the farewell to our old life, you shall do this for me. And now I must go. When next we meet it must be as new acquaintances. Thank you in Hugh's name and my own, and good-bye!"

"Good-bye; you shall have the money to-morrow," and, with a long pressure of her hand, he walked on towards Kensington, while she retraced her steps to the Marble Arch, and reached the hotel before her daughters returned.

CHAPTER XII.

Self-love never yet could look on truth
 But with blear'd beams. Sleek flattery and she
 Are twin-born sisters, and so mix their eyes,
 As, if you sever one, the other dies.

BEN JONSON.

LADY WYCHWOOD was the daughter of a solicitor in the cathedral town of Kemplitten, of the name of Jones. From her childhood her beauty had been remarkable, and her parents, confident that in virtue of it she must "make a great marriage," bestowed on her advantages of education which were not afforded to her two elder sisters. Cecilia was sent to the best school in Kemplitten, while Mary and



Jane learnt whatever they could at home ; and finally, to her sisters' infinite wrath and indignation, was sent for a year to a finishing school at Brighton. But what made them still more angry, when Cecilia was supposed to be "finished" and returned home, Mrs. Jones—who had troubled herself very little indeed about society when her eldest daughters became of an age to enter into it, and had merely let them go to such tea-parties and small dances as came in their way—now began to alter her tactics, begged for vouchers from the great ladies for the county balls, always went out with Cecilia herself, and allowed her a luxury of dress which had never been accorded to them. They complained loudly, but their mother turned a deaf ear to their murmurings, telling them that when their sister married as well as, with her beauty, she was bound to do, she would be able to do so much for them that they were excessively foolish to grudge her the means of making herself attractive.

Mary and Jane did not see the force of the argument; they would rather have



had their "opportunities" now, and did not believe they should ever owe them to their sister. The system on which Cecilia had been brought up had made her somewhat selfish, and inclined to exaggerate her own importance, and they did not think that, if she ever did make a good marriage, she would trouble herself much about them.

Mrs. Jones was surprised and disappointed that two years passed without her beautiful daughter making any satisfactory conquest. Cecilia had had innumerable flirtations, some of them very promising ones, but the desirable swains had loved and ridden away, leaving only mortification behind them. The girl herself was, if possible, more annoyed and mortified than were her parents, and it was perhaps quite as much a wish to escape from her mother's perpetual wonderings and lamentations at her being still unmarried, from her father's complaints of the money which had been wasted upon her, and from her sisters' spiteful speeches, as love for young Mr. Roston, an officer in the Indian Army, that induced her

to elope with him while paying a visit to an old schoolfellow at Brighton.

Her family were furious ; for, though Claud Roston was far above her in birth, he was exceedingly poor, and his relatives, indignant at his marriage, refused to do anything for him. Mr. and Mrs. Jones refused to see their daughter or her husband, so Cecilia took the opportunity of greatly magnifying their importance in Kemplitten, and of giving her husband to understand that she belonged to a considerably higher class of society than was really the case. Her attendance at the county balls had rendered her familiar with the names and the appearance of most of the principal families of the neighbourhood, and she so used her information as to make her husband believe that she had been on terms of intimacy with them.

Mrs. Roston's nature was a selfish and a most untruthful one, and her education had been such as to foster her evil tendencies. Brought up from babyhood to hear of her own beauty, and the success it would probably achieve, she



had not unnaturally learnt to think of herself as the one important person in her little world ; and noticing the manner in which her mother endeavoured to give the impression that they moved in a far better sphere of society than was really the case, had encouraged her natural propensity for deception.

She was far from being intellectual, the chief object of her thoughts being her own beauty, and the use that might be made of it ; but she was not without shrewdness, and soon became a past mistress in the art of reading characters and flattering their possessors. Her beauty was certainly great, and after her marriage it increased ; but it was less than the inexplicable method she possessed of putting every man who ever spoke to her on the best possible terms with himself that caused her wonderful power of fascination. She had a great talent for what is called "putting things," and nothing could often be much more different than the real facts and her account of them, though in the actual words there was perhaps nothing widely divergent from truth.



For the first four years of their life in India Mr. and Mrs. Roston were excessively poor, but at the end of that time, by the unexpected death of two relatives, he inherited a handsome fortune. At first Cecilia was very anxious to return to England, and it is very probable that he would have thrown up his profession to please the wife whom he absolutely adored, but the breaking out of the Mutiny prevented such a thing being possible, and, when it was over, Mrs. Roston was no longer desirous herself that he should do so. In the interval she had made the acquaintance of Vere Lauriston, and her heart was stirred as it had never before been. She no longer wished to quit India, and her husband, now Major Roston, who loved his profession next to his wife, was only too glad that she had changed her mind. He had no very near relatives left in England, the Indian life exactly suited him, and he felt little inclined to give it up at present; though of course, like every Anglo-Indian, he cherished projects of ultimately settling at home.

It was a blow to him when the doctors de-



cided that it was absolutely necessary that their three children, aged respectively six, four, and three, should be sent to England, and scarcely a sligher one to find that his wife meant to take them there herself. Apart from his adoration for her, which made him grudge the months passed away from him, his indolence made him fairly dread having to undertake the management of his own affairs, which he had from the first resigned into his wife's hands. He learnt with infinite satisfaction that Captain Lauriston with his sister was going home in the same vessel, and committed his wife to his care without a misgiving.

It was certain that Mrs. Roston and Captain Lauriston were very much attached to each other, and they were foolishly unguarded; still there was not really any foundation for the violent language and the insinuations which Major Roston's relatives used respecting her. She was foolish enough to show her preference and to flirt with him very openly, but this was the extent of the mischief, which they exaggerated into something much more heinous.



Expostulation was of no use. Mrs. Millington, a very plain woman, who had never had an admirer in her life but her own husband, who was deaf and dumb, and had fallen in love with her for her dexterity in conversing on her fingers, was of course most severe on an attractive woman, and made it a point of conscience to believe the very worst of her; while Mr. Roston, who held the extremest of Low Church views, seemed to believe that a charming woman must necessarily be lost, no matter what she did or said. Everything that Mrs. Roston did was cavilled at and misrepresented, till her irritation caused her to *afficher* herself much more with Captain Lauriston than would otherwise have been the case.

The letters which his relatives despatched to India only stirred up Major Roston against them, and he wrote back in hot indignation at their "slander" of his wife, which rendered them if possible more prejudiced against her than before. Mrs. Millington even went the length of writing to Mrs. Jones, with whom she was not acquainted, declaring that she "felt it

her duty" to inform her of her daughter's atrocious conduct. It was perhaps hardly wonderful that Cecilia's temper rose, and that she did many imprudent things that, under other circumstances, she never would have dreamt of.

Mrs. Jones was much distressed, and wrote her daughter a feeble and querulous letter of protest, which made Cecilia angry, and which she did not answer. Her father had refused to receive her at home, and it was only by stealth that her mother dared to correspond with her. Altogether her visit to England was a sore mortification and disappointment, and her only pleasant time was when she was paying visits either to old school-fellows or to acquaintances formed in India. It was during one of these, to the wife of General Wigford at Torquay, that Dr. and Miss Barford had met her, and it was Captain Lauriston's presence at the same watering-place which had occasioned the deprecatory gossip that Aunt Milly had remembered.

It was sorely against her will that Mrs.



Roston left her two little girls in the charge of Mrs. Millington, but it had been so settled before she left India, and there was no possibility in writing of explaining to her husband all the reasons which made her averse to so doing. Besides there was really no one else ; her own family had cast her off—besides, she did not wish her girls to be brought up as she had been, nor that they should ever know how very inferior her position in life had been to their father's. Wilfred was placed at a preparatory school at Brighton, under the surveillance of a friend of his father's, who promised occasionally to see the boy, and Mrs. Millington took possession of the girls, and almost seemed to grudge their mother the opportunity of wishing them good-bye.

Mrs. Roston was by no means a devoted mother ; she positively disliked children in general, and, though fairly fond of her own, often felt them a sore trouble and annoyance. Still it cost her something for the moment to part from them altogether ; and it was not entirely, as Mrs. Millington averred, "all for



show and effect" that she clung to and wept over them. It is true that she very soon consoled herself for their loss; still, for the time, the sorrow was genuine.

Captain Lauriston and his sister were to have returned with her, but Miss Lauriston, having become engaged to the gentleman with whom she afterwards settled at Shanghai, her brother remained a fortnight longer in England to give her away, and Mrs. Roston went out alone, though Mrs. Millington always protested that such was not the case.

The day she left England the tidings reached her of her father's sudden death, and her first letters from home told her that he had left his family in great poverty. It was then that the temptation to make use of her sole control of her husband's affairs first assailed her. She could not bear to tell him the true state of the case, as in doing so she must have revealed in what a different circle her parents moved from that which she had allowed him to believe. Her pride would have been hurt by the confession, and besides, she knew that he would



have some difficulty in forgiving her for having deceived him. So she held her peace about her family troubles, merely mentioning the fact of her father's death, and leaving him to imagine that it was owing to her marriage that nothing was left to her.

She sent her mother help, and received in return many wandering and involved letters of thanks, sometimes accompanied by a few sarcastic lines from Mary, wondering that such a great man as Colonel Roston now was, should dole out his gifts in so niggardly a manner.

Jane had married a shopkeeper in Kemp-litten, and had died, fortunately, as Mrs. Roston thought, without leaving any family. But about two years after her father's death came a terrible blow. Hugh, her only brother, the only one of her family besides her mother for whom she cared—principally because he had always petted and admired his beautiful sister—embezzled money to a considerable amount, belonging to his employers, and was arrested as he was embarking for America. Poor Mrs.



Jones, who adored her son even more than she had ever done her daughter, threw herself on the mercy of the firm, and they, finding that the money had all been lost in wild speculations, and that they should recover none of it by legal proceedings, agreed not to prosecute on condition of a promise that the sum should be gradually refunded. Mrs. Jones pledged herself to this, more with the hope of getting her darling boy safe out of the way than with any idea of the possibility of ever fulfilling her promise, and then, terrified at having to sign a legal document, which she only half comprehended, and regarded as a sort of moral blunderbuss that might incontinently go off and compass her destruction at any moment, she wrote off to her daughter with a wild prayer for assistance.

Such a demand nearly paralysed Mrs. Roston. At first she thought that she must tell her husband all and throw herself on his mercy, but her pride revolted. What! after all these years let him know that she was the daughter, not, as



she had led him to believe, of one of the country gentlemen of Fernshire, but only of a very second-rate solicitor at Kemplitten, that her mother was dependent upon her, and, worst of all, that her only brother had embezzled money, and only owed his liberty to the leniency of his employers, and to a pledge which there seemed but little hope of redeeming? No! it was not to be thought of; and, instead of confiding in her husband, she at once began to devise means to send more money home than had hitherto been the case. It was a sore trial to her, for not only did she realise the danger, if her husband should at any time take the fancy to look over her accounts, but she had to curtail her own expenditure as much as she dared to do without arousing suspicion, and she was unable to help Captain Lauriston as she had before frequently done. To him alone she confided the whole story, and his sympathy was a great support to her.

It was the necessity of securing every penny that she could for the liquidation of her



brother's debt that had made Mrs. Roston despatch her boy to a cheap school in Cumberland, instead of to Eton, where his father believed him to be. With anyone but Colonel Roston such a thing would have been absolutely impossible, but, always indolent and careless about his correspondence, he had been so indignant at the criticisms of Mrs. Millington and Mr. Roston, his only relatives, on his wife's conduct, that he had utterly given up writing to them, and all the slight communication there was respecting the girls passed through his wife's hands.

As time went on, he grew to adore his darling Cecilia more and more; not only was she the most beautiful and fascinating of women, but she saved him all trouble, and never allowed him to be disturbed by either business or correspondence. Gossips might shrug their shoulders and wonder what Colonel Roston could be about to allow his wife to flirt so outrageously, not only with her constant attaché, Captain Lauriston, but with every other man

that approached her ; but he only saw in it the natural homage paid to her beauty and charm, and was well pleased to see her courted and amusing herself.

With regard to Captain Lauriston, he was sincerely attached to him, and it was a real blow to him when his accession of fortune caused him to leave India. Strange to say, he regretted the departure of their friend more than did his wife. Cecilia Roston had not strong affections, and, though for a long time she had believed herself very much in love with him, and would still have been jealous had he transferred his attentions to anyone else, she really no longer cared particularly about him. His knowledge of her family troubles had had somewhat the effect of weaning her from him, though, with rare discretion, he never adverted to them, unless she commenced the conversation ; but she could not bear that he or anyone else should know that her brother, unable of course to obtain any clerkship or situation of trust, was actually serving behind the counter in a linendraper's shop in Manchester. Still



she was sorry to lose him ; he had been her chief friend so long, and to fill the blank caused by his absence, she flirted more determinedly than ever, and gave occasion for much head-shaking and scandal. Flirting was to her as necessary as the air she breathed ; she was fairly accomplished, but she did not care for reading, and had no intellectual resources ; she found it so easy to attract men, with her lovely eyes and soft, sympathetic ways, that it became almost a point of honour with her that no man should be in her company and not do her homage, and their subjugation became her one engrossing pastime. Naturally those less favoured by Nature, who were left to amuse each other while all the pleasantest men gathered round Mrs. Roston in a ball-room or at the band-stand, or those whose husbands, brothers, or lovers fell under her spell and became, for the time, oblivious of everyone else, were little inclined to be lenient critics, and Mrs. Roston was abused with an ardour rare even in Indian gossip. She had the unusual talent of never making enemies of those who had been her



adorers ; though she might have dismissed them, it was done with such consummate tact, with such wise regard for their feelings and their vanity, that they never would listen to a syllable against her, and this raised the wrath of their feminine belongings to a yet higher pitch.

Colonel Roston's death was a very great blow to his wife. Though she had never been in love with him, yet his adoration of her, and his constant solicitude for her happiness and comfort, had made her very fond of him, and in her first loneliness she missed him sorely. For some little time after his death she was ill, and nearly six months had elapsed before she was able to leave India.

In the meantime, she had received Captain Lauriston's offer of marriage, and, after some deliberation, had accepted it. It was true that she no longer loved him, but she firmly believed him to be still absolutely devoted to her. She shrank from returning to England to find herself utterly alone, for Colonel Roston's relatives would cast her off, and she did not choose to



associate with her own. Their joint income would not be great, but it would be more than hers alone; and she felt appalled at the thought of facing the responsibilities of English life with three children, and no one on whom to lean.

What disturbed her most was how the money could now be spared to support her mother, and to pay the still remaining amount of Hugh's debt. She had chosen to ignore Mrs. Hornum's letters, not, as she had told Sir Clement, because she had believed that Mrs. Millington had left the money to pay for the girls—for, as she was well aware, that lady had at her husband's death sunk every shilling of her money in an annuity, and had always lived up to her income—but because she was so anxious to extinguish her brother's debt, and feel once more free.

It was partly his knowledge of all her circumstances that made her unhesitatingly accept Captain Lauriston's offer; he knew that the money *must* be paid for Hugh, and it would be impossible to tell the whole sad history to a

stranger. So he, believing her desperately in love with him, deemed himself bound in honour to propose; and she, conceiving his devotion to be as great as ever, accepted him for her convenience, and would doubtless have married him, had not fate decreed that Sir Clement Wychwood should go home as an invalid in the *Benares*.

Mrs. Roston had accidentally heard Sir Clement mentioned shortly before her husband's death by two gentlemen who were passing through the station, and had dined at the Colonel's house. They had been talking of some shooting excursion which they had made in his company, and had diverged to some remarks upon Wychwood, from which she had learnt that he was a widower, and very rich. Not, however, being interested in a man whom she had never seen, she never thought of him again until, the first day on board the *Benares*, she accidentally heard some one say that Sir Clement Wychwood was on board, but so ill that it was doubtful whether he would reach England.



Among her other fascinations, Mrs. Roston could be, if she chose, the most perfect of nurses. There was a softness and repose about her that invariably soothed the patient, and made him bless the hours which she spent beside him. When she first began her attentions to Sir Clement, she had not formed the design of marrying him; it was her nature to make herself necessary to every man with whom she came in contact; even when he first began to improve in health, and to show his appreciation of her attentions, she only thought of him as a possibly useful acquaintance.

But gradually the project of becoming Lady Wychwood began to take form and shape in her mind. In the long hours they had spent together he had talked often of the manor, and she had quickly learnt what a fine position would be that of its mistress. Happily, too, Limeshire was far removed from Farnshire; there was little fear of her finding herself confronted by anyone who had known her at Kemplitten. It was as this scheme grew

in her mind that she resolved to take advantage of her youthful looks, to suppress her girls altogether, and to so speak the words between seventeen and eighteen in mentioning her boy that they should sound like between seven and eight.

All succeeded according to her hopes, and when, on leaving St. George's, she stepped into the carriage as Lady Wychwood, she breathed a sigh of relief, even though she was aware of the inevitable disclosures ahead. She relied greatly on her own power of manipulating facts, which had often before stood her in good stead.

After her return to the hotel from her interview with Lord Hexham, Lady Wychwood sat down and began to think over her future life. The difficulties seemed gradually smoothing themselves away from her path. Nothing could be kinder, more affectionate, more generous than Sir Clement, and he had taken her suppression of her age and of the children's existence far better than she had dared



to hope that he would do. The metamorphosis of Captain Lauriston into Lord Hexham was all that could be desired, as it appeared to her that there could be now no difficulty about their meeting, and, though no longer in love with him, they had been friends so long that she did not wish to lose sight of him altogether. She had dreaded the sight of her daughters above everything. Suppose they were neither pretty nor presentable!

But her fears had apparently been groundless. Hilda was decidedly pretty, rather like herself, and had already a good manner, which might be much improved; while Ella, though *brusque* at present, had plenty of time before her in which she might be judiciously toned down.

There remained Reseda, and all the surroundings at Wychwood and social politics of Limeshire; but to these Lady Wychwood gave little thought. She was well satisfied that she could charm in any society; and as



for Mignonette, it did not appear to her that she was of sufficient consequence to be worthy of lengthened consideration.

CHAPTER XIII.

How the time
Loiters in expectation! Then the mind
Drags the dead burden of a hundred years
In one short moment's space. The nimble heart
Beats with impatient throbs,—sick of delay,
And pants to be at ease.

HARVARD.

MIGNONETTE was much excited when her father announced to her the approaching arrival of two companions, and cross-questioned him so closely that he had considerable difficulty in answering, and had often to fall back upon the observation—

“My dear, you will soon see for yourself.”

The preparation of the house was a real de-

light to her. She had never before seen any of the rooms, excepting the library, look habitable; and even that, being used so rarely, had always a somewhat comfortless appearance, as if the table and few chairs near the fireplace were a sort of temporary encampment in the wilderness. But now the brown holland coverings were removed from the rich brocaded satin walls of the saloon, and their beautiful golden-yellow shade shone forth in fine contrast to the rich old carved oak, while curtains and hangings emerged from their long seclusion, and chairs and sofas, inlaid tables and cabinets, china, and other objects of *virtù* that Mignonette had never beheld, once more saw the light. She was in a state of almost childish excitement, and exclaimed, on the morning of Sir Clement's departure,

"Oh! how I should like to run down to the rectory and get Aunt Milly to come and see how lovely it looks!"

"And why should you not?" said Sir Clement, smiling, and fondly stroking her nut-brown curls.



"Because—I can't go to the rectory now," said Mignonette, colouring. "You know Edwin is there, and you said I was not to speak to him; and I went one day and he tried to make me, and—you see, papa, it is awkward. Do you still object to my just speaking a few words?"

"Yes," said Sir Clement, who, when he had once made up his mind, prided himself upon never changing it, and expected any order he gave to be considered immutable as the law of the Medes and Persians. "Yes, Mignonette, I never change my mind, and I am glad you are wise enough to keep away from what is perplexing. But there is a way out of your difficulty. Write to Miss Barford and ask her to come up and lunch with you and Miss Ashstead; though you must not suppose that the sight of an ordinarily furnished house is anything new to her."

"Oh! no, of course not," answered Mignonette, who did not like to say what was really in her thoughts, that Miss Barford might be able to point out to her things which her

mother had used, and prevent her at some future time asking questions that might give her father pain.

Miss Barford willingly accepted the invitation. She fully realized the cause of the cessation of the girl's frequent visits to the rectory, and, much as she missed her brightness, recognized that, while Sir Clement's order was not rescinded, Mignonette was wise to stay away during Edwin's visit. She deplored Sir Clement's harshness, which she thought disproportionate to the offence, but his daughter was of course bound to obey his wishes, and had, she thought, shown herself very judicious. Edwin had not behaved well in trying to make the girl speak to him, when he knew she was forbidden to do so; he had made the thing harder for the child, who was only doing her duty. Miss Barford would have felt still more annoyed with her nephew had she known that he had waylaid Mignonette on her way home, and had again striven vainly to overcome her silence, since which time the girl had never left the garden unaccompanied by Miss Ash-

stead. She understood, too, Mignonette's dislike to being called Reseda, or indeed by any name but that to which she was accustomed, and wondered that Sir Clement had agreed to so strange a measure, but she would not say anything of this, and merely remarked that she was herself too old to change, but that Mignonette must remember it was really only another name for the same thing.

"Now," said Mignonette, when luncheon was over—"now, Aunt Milly, I want you to tell me just how things used to be in mamma's time, where she used to sit, and which things she was fond of and used to use. I don't want to ask papa stupid questions that might hurt him, and all the things are new to me."

"You expect a good deal of an old woman's memory, dear child," said Miss Barford, with a gentle laugh. "I hardly think your mother used to sit much in the saloon; her boudoir was upstairs, the room with the oriel window over the porch, it led out of her dressing-room."



"Let us go and look at it," said Mignonette, leading the way.

Miss Barford followed slowly. How well she remembered the last time she had been in that boudoir—a bitter, snowy day in January, when the warmth and brightness of what Sir Clement called "his love-bird's nest" formed so strong a contrast to the cheerless landscape without. She had come up to mention some poor woman's case to Lady Wychwood, and had been met with the sympathetic and open-handed generosity which Mignon always showed to those in trouble or distress. That night Lady Wychwood was taken ill, the next day Mignonette was born, and before a week was past the lovely, happy, adored wife lay in her coffin.

The boudoir was very different now. Evidently Sir Clement did not intend it to be used in that capacity by the second Lady Wychwood, and Miss Barford felt relieved that such was the case. Though sincerely glad both for his own sake and his daughter's that he should marry again, she yet felt



a sort of jealousy of the woman who had taken the place of the sweet and lovely Mignon. The room was now a very ordinary bed-room, and the communication with the adjoining dressing-room had been stopped up; but still Miss Barford saw the picture as it had appeared to her nearly sixteen years ago, and the tears rose to her eyes.

"There is nothing pretty here," said Mignonette, in a disappointed tone.

"No. I suppose your father has chosen other rooms for Lady Wychwood."

"Yes; in the west wing," and Mignonette skipped along oak passages, and up and down a step here, a flight there, till she reached the rooms which alone of the house had been newly furnished, and which were delightfully pretty and comfortable; but, as Miss Barford silently remarked, as different as possible from those which Sir Clement had occupied with his first wife.

"And I haven't told you everything," said Mignonette, when they had returned to the



drawing-room, and Aunt Milly had done her best to tell her any articles which were specially connected with her mother. "Papa did not tell me before, but, besides a son, Lady Wychwood—mamma, I mean—has two daughters, who have always been at school, and now they are to live here. Will it not be nice for me to have companions?"

"But, my dear, Lady Wychwood is quite a young woman; her daughters must be mere children, hardly companions for you."

"Oh! but papa must have made some mistake: for Hilda, the eldest, is past sixteen, and Ella nearly fourteen: so you see I am just between them. I hope, as they have been at school, they won't look down upon me very much, and think me very ignorant."

"Do you think everyone who has been at school must necessarily be so very clever?" asked Miss Barford, smiling.

"I think they ought to be," said Mignonette. "Oh! and then they must know so many other girls, and understand so many things that I know nothing about."



"Well, dear, if they do, you probably know many things of which they are ignorant. Girls at school know nothing of country life, and you will be able to tell them about birds, and animals, and flowers in return for what they teach you of other matters."

As Miss Barford walked home it struck her as more and more extraordinary that Sir Clement should have made so great a mistake in describing his wife's age. "Seven or eight and twenty," he had said, while, if Mignonette's account of the two girls' ages was correct, she must certainly be nine or ten years older. How strange, too, that he should have utterly omitted all mention of the girls, who would be the constant companions of his daughter, while he spoke of the son who was not likely to affect her so much. Altogether it seemed to Miss Barford very strange, and gave her, she hardly knew why, an uncomfortable impression.

Again there recurred to her memory the beautiful Mrs. Roston, with a boy and two little girls, whom they had met at Torquay,

and about whose conduct there had been such unpleasant reports. The ages of the girls, in so far as she could remember, about corresponded to what that of Lady Wychwood's children must have been at the time. Could it be the same? She trusted not. Her sweet little Mignonette would be none the better for a step-mother of doubtful conduct.

After all she might be fanciful, and would not anticipate or suspect evil. Even if Lady Wychwood did prove to be the Mrs. Roston of Torquay, it was very probable that rumour might have maligned her, as it was too apt to do pretty women unavoidably absent from their husband's protection; and even if it had not—well, it was twelve years ago, and a great change for the better might have taken place in her—surely it must, or she could never have attracted anyone so fastidious about the behaviour of women as Sir Clement.

And considerably perturbed, but determined to think the best, Miss Barford endeavoured to dismiss the subject from her mind.

It was a very lovely day in early October that Sir Clement brought his bride home. He had specially impressed upon Mr. McDonald that any attempt at a "reception" would be most unwelcome, and in deference to his wishes the preparations which had been commenced had been unwillingly abandoned.

Limeshire was a specially quiet, dull county, and the thought of such an event as the home-coming of a bride and bridegroom, and of the re-opening of such a place as Wychwood, had stirred the rustic pulses with the hope of gazing open-mouthed at arches of flowers and evergreens, shouting vociferously at frequent intervals, and imbibing a vast amount of eleemosynary beer. It was felt to be hard that Sir Clement should have put a stop to these rare and innocent pleasures; but some of the older inhabitants apologised for him, remarking that doubtless "it would 'mind him too much of the toime when he bring'd home her fust leddyship;" and though the grumblers were hardly appeased, they were partially silenced.

It was true that Sir Clement did dread a



repetition of the scene, which he remembered only too well, when he brought his lovely Mignon home, fondly hoping for a long life of happiness with the woman he had loved so long. But this was not all; he had a very keen sense of the ridiculous, and felt that a reception that included, not only himself and his wife, but that wife's nearly grown-up daughters, would be most absurd, and this finally decided him on emphatically negating any demonstration.

It is needless to say that during the whole of the day Mignonette had been in the wildest state of excitement. She had wandered from one room to the other, utterly incapable of sitting still, re-arranging the flowers which she had put in every room, altering the position of a chair here, moving a book there, doing everything she could think of to make everything look pretty and homelike. And yet, whenever she entered the saloon, her eyes would wistfully seek her mother's face, and she would feel conscious of a pang of sorrow at her being supplanted.



Miss Ashstead did not attempt to interfere with her pupil ; she felt for the girl's restlessness, and forbore from worrying her with entreaties to sit still and not tire herself, which she well knew would have been useless, and would only have been fretting to hear. Tippet followed his mistress about in a state of extreme perplexity, not being at all able to understand her absolute inability to sit still. When she stopped anywhere to re-arrange a flower, he would stretch himself on the ground, wag his tail, and look up in her face, as much as to say that he thought they had come to a very comfortable resting-place, and might as well stay there ; but Mignonette took no heed of his well-meant suggestions, and as she moved away he rose and followed her, preferring her company to the most luxurious rug.

After luncheon Mignonette went out to see the carriages start. The stable department at the manor was in a state of activity such as she never remembered, for Sir Clement had not been idle during his stay in London, and a barouche, brougham, landau, and omnibus, with



three pairs of carriage horses, a pretty park phaeton, and a handsome pair of cobs, and three or four riding horses, occupied the space formerly consecrated to old Tommy and the ancient pony carriage. It was a great change, and Mignonette was hardly yet sure that she liked it. She was accustomed to take Tommy a carrot, or an apple, or a piece of bread twice a day, and she was shy of going to him, now that there were all the strange grooms about; but she felt that Tommy would miss her, and that it was hard that he should be disappointed because she felt foolish and shy. So the old pony had not missed his accustomed delicacies, and Mignonette was gradually growing accustomed to the unwonted activity of the stable yard, though she had never yet ventured within range of the stables where the new horses were located. She looked forward greatly to going there with her father, and making acquaintance with the handsome animals she so greatly admired.

The barouche, with a fine pair of iron greys, and the omnibus, with a strong pair of bays,



started in very good time, and Mignonette did her best not to fidget, and even, having taken another stroll through the rooms, and again altered a flower here and a chair there, betook herself to the school-room, and tried to practise a mazurka by Chopin, but it was of little avail. Miss Ashstead, observing her with sympathetic eyes, saw that, though she did her best to give her attention to the music, her ears were really straining for the slightest sound in the avenue, though it was yet long before the time when the arrival could be expected. However, she said nothing, thinking that it was better for the girl, who had been wandering about the whole morning, to sit still, and even make the effort to fix her mind on some employment, than that she should commence another pilgrimage through the often visited rooms.

At length the stable-clock struck the quarter before five, the earliest moment at which a very punctual train and swift horses could render the arrival of the anxiously-expected party possible. Chopin's "mazurka" might have been the "Dead March in Saul," for all

that Mignonette had known of it for the last quarter of an hour, though her eyes and fingers had been zealously but mechanically disentangling the intricacies of its double flats and sharps. She rose and closed the piano.

"I must go and see that tea is quite ready," she said; "they cannot be long now. Oh, I hope the train will not be very late! The days close in so fast, and it is such a pity she should not see the place at once at its best, it is looking so lovely now. Did you notice the avenue? The trees really look like gold."

"Don't be more impatient than you can help, dear," said Miss Ashstead, stroking her hand as she stood beside her; "remember trains are seldom quite punctual."

"I will try," answered the girl, with a kiss; "but only think what it is to me—what a change after the secluded life I have always led! I cannot help being excited. I have had the tea put in the hall; I thought it seemed more home-like, less formal, than the saloon."

And, without waiting for an answer, she ran lightly away, leaving Miss Ashstead musing much on the future. No one more fully appreciated than she the change which this day's arrival would make in her pupil's life. It must be good that she should have a home-life, from which she had as yet been so entirely debarred, and yet, if Lady Wychwood should not care for her, and be only interested in her own daughters, life would still be sad for the poor child. And, if the new wife should have a son, what a change it would make for Mignonette, from being the heiress of Wychwood to being only the daughter of the house!

Happily no thought of her heiress-ship had ever been implanted in the girl's brain, so much so that Miss Ashstead doubted whether she had ever realised the position which she at present held; and, in view of possible events, it was of course well this should be the case. She wondered what would be the change made in her own position by the alteration of circumstances: three pupils instead of one would be a great change in the quiet school-

room where she and Mignonette had been so comfortable together. Miss Ashstead had a very strong prejudice against school education for girls, thinking that the pupils learnt more harm and nonsense in their recreation hours than they obtained good from their instructresses at other times. She had been at more than one school herself, and knew how much silly chatter about fancied lovers occupied the girls' minds, and how very often they fell into the habit of clandestine correspondence. Mignonette was so good and so true that she thought there was little fear of contamination for her, but yet she prepared herself to be vigorously on her guard against any possible mischief.

Meanwhile Mignonette, having satisfied herself that the tea was in readiness, had put on her hat and taken up her position at the top of the hall steps whence she could look all down the avenue, and see the carriage the moment it turned in at the great gates.

It was a lovely evening,—not a breath was stirring, and the air was soft and balmy. The

lake was like a mirror, without a ripple on its blue surface save where the stately swans sailed majestically along. The last rays of the autumnal sun lit up the splendid lime avenue till it seemed literally bounded with walls of gold, and away farther in the park were the redder glories of the beech and the russet tints of the oak.

The time seemed very long. Surely no accident could have happened! It would be too cruel that a train that could travel safely on every day in the year should be wrecked on that particular occasion! But before Mignonette had time to make herself very unhappy on this score, the carriage turned in at the gates, and she knew that the moment she had been so anxiously awaiting was at hand.

Perhaps the time that elapsed while the carriage was driving up the avenue was the hardest waiting of all. Mignonette turned hot and cold, and wished over and over again that the meeting were over, that it were the next day, that something would delay the carriage which she had been so anxiously awaiting!



For the first time the thought struck her,—perhaps her mother would not care for her! Perhaps her heart would be too absorbed by her own children for her to be able to afford a corner for her step-daughter! The idea was novel, and Mignonette felt as if a cold douche had been thrown on her warm feelings, and involuntarily drew back into the house and took off her hat.

But when she heard the carriage stop at the foot of the steps, she could not control herself and remain indoors. What would her father think of such want of welcome on her part? And she flew down the steps, almost falling over one of the footmen as she did so. Sir Clement alighted first, and handed out his wife before he perceived his daughter; but, as soon as he did so, he bent down and kissed her.

“Cecilia, here is our child,” was all he said; and Mignonette raised her eyes, and was at once fascinated with the beauty that met her view.

“Dear child,” said Lady Wychwood, at once taking her in her arms, “how glad I am to see



you! how sweet of you to meet us on the door-step! You must love me very much, my Reseda; I am sure I shall love you. And here," turning to the two girls, "are my two children, who will love you too."

Perhaps the speech was altogether too sweet, but Mignonette was little inclined to be critical, though the sound of her new name struck her painfully, and made her shiver. The few people she had hitherto known always said exactly what they meant, and she was little likely to imagine that others were less candid. She kissed Hilda and Ella, who were both fairly dazzled with the grandeur of the place, so much finer than anything they had ever seen or even imagined. Even Lady Wychwood, who had expected a grand place, was agreeably surprised, and felt a throb of pride at finding herself the mistress of the manor.

Mignonette thought there never could have been anyone so beautiful as her step-mother, as she sat at tea in one of the old carved oak, tapestry-seated chairs, the dark violet of her velvet dress setting off her lovely complexion,



and the large velvet hat showing well on the masses of her magnificent fair hair. She could hardly take her eyes off her, and found it quite difficult to pour out the tea properly. The hall was a fine room, not very lofty, and ceiled and panelled with black polished oak; it might have looked somewhat gloomy but for the bright wood fire which Mignonette had had lighted, and for which she half apologised, hoping it was not too hot, but she thought it would look cheerful.

"Quite right," said her father.

"Most thoughtful, dearest," said Lady Wyckwood; "it is just what I like; you can't think how I enjoy it. And now let me look at you more closely than I could do on the steps. Surely you are not nearly sixteen? Almost as old as Hilda? Why, you are not so tall even as Ella."

"It is rather a tender point with Mignonette," said Sir Clement, laughing, "at least it used to be as a child. I know the first question she always asked me when I came home was whether I thought she was grown."



"But papa always says that all the Wychwood women are small," said Mignonette.

"That you may see in the picture gallery to-morrow," said Sir Clement; "you will not feel inclined to explore the house to-night, Cecilia; I am sure you must be tired. I will take you to our rooms. Of course you three girls dine with us to-night."

"I never dined late in my life," said Mignonette, awestruck at the idea.

"Well, you must begin to-night," said her father, laughing; "take these two girls to their rooms and present them to Miss Ashstead,—she is quite well, I hope? Oh, stay, tell her your mamma and I shall be very glad if she will come to the drawing-room this evening. Lady Wychwood is too tired to come to the school-room now, or she would do so. Will you remember?"

"Yes, oh yes," said Mignonette, leading off the two girls, and nearly paralysed with astonishment to hear Ella say to her sister as they went up the broad, shallow oak staircase,

"What humbug! Mamma isn't tired one bit."

Mignonette felt inclined to remonstrate, it seemed as if her father was being accused of saying what was not true, but she reflected that that could not by any possibility have been meant, and held her peace.

The interview with Miss Ashstead in the school-room was short, as the girls had to go and dress, and Mignonette took them to their rooms, and then ran back for a few words.

"Oh, she is so wonderfully beautiful!" she exclaimed; "I never dreamt that anyone could be so very lovely. But you will see her to-night,—you will come down?"

"Yes, dear, certainly."

"I am so glad," and Mignonette ran away, leaving her governess musing on the faces of her new charges, and deciding that, though she did not as yet know why, she was sure that Ella would be her favourite.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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